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By JACK DRUMMOND

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The TEXAS FIREBRAND *By* JOHN G. PE

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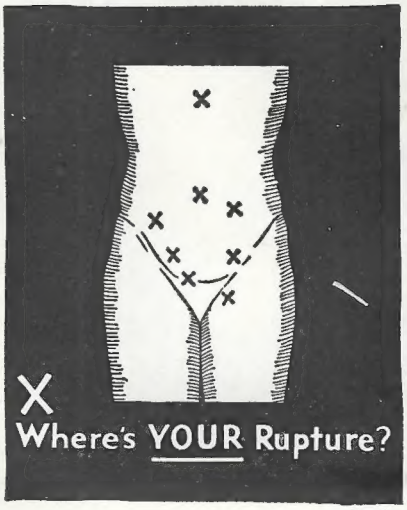

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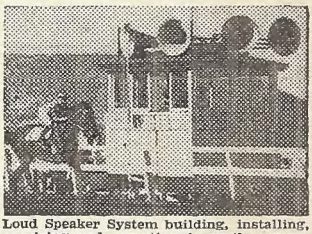

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JULY
1940

Western Trails

Vol.
XXXII
No. 3

A. A. WYN, Editor

An ACE Magazine

HARRY WIDMER, Managing Editor

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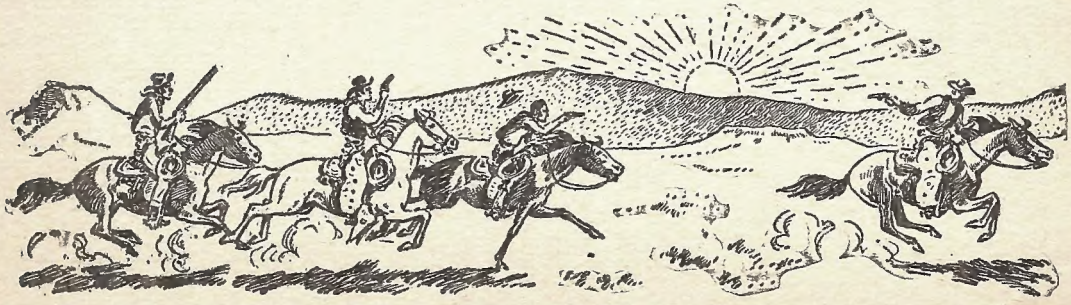
Cover by George J. Rozen



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Gun Ghouls

Their guns belched hot lead.

The murder of his brother led Dell Barton to the tough town of Kamima—and to a beautiful girl who ramrodded the same brand flaunted by the killer.

CHAPTER I

GUN HELLION

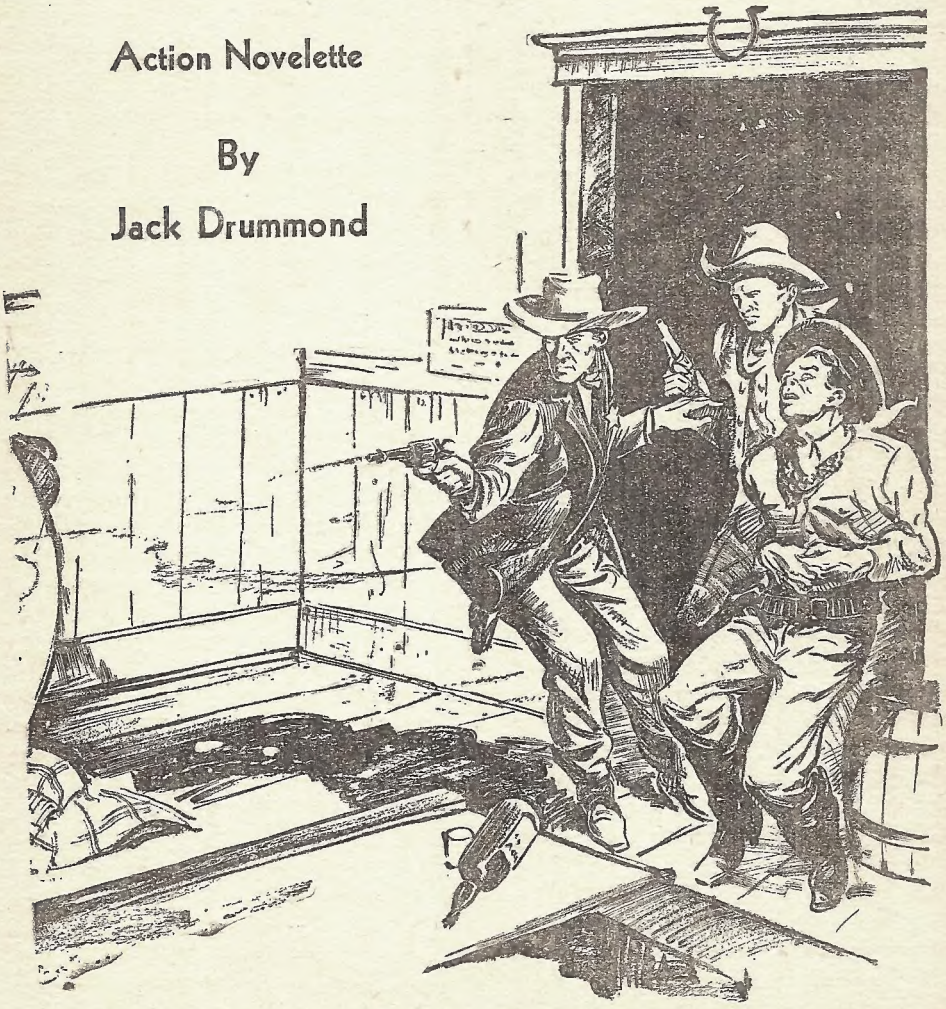
A PREMONITION of disaster laid hold of Jed Barton as he stirred himself to kindle a fire in the small cook stove in his two-room nester shack. His movements were wary, uneasy. The fear that

Ride in Kamima

Action Novelette

By

Jack Drummond



gripped his soul was reflected in his eyes each time he moved to the doorway between the two rooms. From here he sent long, anxious glances out through the front window and along the rutted, winding road that led down the short, rounded valley in the general direction of Mesa Verde.

The sun was low, shadows were lengthening. Jed Barton's anxiety increased each time he sent a futile glance out along that road and failed to catch sight of his brother Dell returning from a trip into Mesa Verde after supplies.

But the fear that gripped Jed Barton was not for his brother. Dell was young and tough and handy with guns. He was confident, strong-willed and had a way about him that demanded respect. Sometimes Jed Barton envied his younger brother his

self-assurance and recklessness. This feeling found its birth in an inferiority complex that developed in Jed Barton when he thought of his own dwarfed physique, and a broken leg that had left him with an impeding limp.

Jed Barton was suffering from that complex now. He was a little man who had acted upon impulse. And now repercussions were setting in, putting a fear in his soul that he couldn't shake. He picked up a carbine that was standing close by, fondled it a moment. Then, with a curse for his gnawing fears, he set it down on its stalk by the stove where it would be within easy reach of his hand.

His thoughts jerked back convulsively to the kid who had shown up at the shack shortly before noon. He was a boy of fourteen with brush-snagged clothes, panting lungs. His drawn, bloodless face would have looked dead except for the two staring eyes that reflected the half-crazed fire of a soul tormented. Words had gushed from grief-stricken lips, framing a story that sickened Jed Barton with its diabolical savagery.

Night riders had visited the nester home of Hobe McClure and his family in Kamima Valley. When ordered to leave the valley before daylight McClure had protested and received in turn a wicked slash across the face with a braided quirt. Maddened, the nester had attacked his three masked tormentors. As they beat him down his wife had come to help him, snatching the mask from the face of one of the three.

The name of the man fell from her lips as she recognized him. Fear or a drink-crazed savagery drove the man to slash her across the head with his gun barrel. Twice again the heavy gun barrel fell with sickening force before she crumpled to the floor. Denny McClure had watched all this from an adjoining room. The horror of seeing his parents struck down before his eyes seared a picture across his brain that would haunt him to his grave.

Crazed with fear and stricken too speechless to scream, he'd slid out through the open bedroom window and started running. He remembered little after that except that he kept running, plunging through brush that ripped and tore at him and at times threw him to the ground where he lay panting for breath.

DAYLIGHT had found him outside Kamima Valley high on the east slopes of the mountains that fringed in the high, secluded cattle dominion. All that day and the following night he'd worked his way cautiously down the slopes to the rolling foothill country where Jed and Dell Barton's homesteads lay.

Jed Barton first thought of hiding the youth in his shack, but fear for his own safety vetoed this move. He knew that men ruthless enough to murder women would be engaged in a determined search for the boy; that if they found him here his own life would be worth no more than the boy's. Finally he outfitted Denny McClure with a saddle horse and sent him racing toward Mesa Verde to report the murder of his parents to the sheriff.

All afternoon Jed Barton had hovered there in his shack waiting for Denny McClure's pursuers to show up. He was still waiting, knowing that if they did show up it would be because they knew the boy had stopped here and told his story. For the road leading down out of Kamima Valley to Mesa Verde trailed several miles to the south of the Barton homesteads.

For the tenth time in as many minutes Jed Barton sidled to the doorway to stare out along the road. This time he was rewarded by the sight of a light wagon rounding the point of a low ridge that fingered out into the little valley a half mile below the house.

Jed's heart took a leap and he

found new strength. That would be Dell returning from town. With Dell here he could unload his problem onto broader shoulders and feel a certain amount of safety.

He watched the light rig until it dipped into a swale and passed from view. The rig would reappear, he knew, less than an eighth of a mile below the house. He turned from the doorway with a sigh of relief that died in his throat when his gaze caught the figure of a man who stood framed in the open, back doorway.

The intruder was short and heavy-set with a dark, oily skin that stamped him a breed, dangerous and treacherous. A .45 was cuddled in one of his big, hairy paws and his voice rumbled an order that stopped Jed Barton dead in his tracks.

"Pull up an' reach for the rafters, mister!"

Barton didn't need a second invitation. He knew that before he could cover the half dozen steps that separated him from his carbine he would be a dead man. As his hands went shoulder high the intruder stepped farther into the room. He motioned Barton to sit in one of the rawhide chairs that was pulled up beside the table on the opposite side of the room from the stove.

"Might as well die comfortable," the breed said, his heavy lips pulling back into a grin that had no mirth about it. "Didn't nobody ever tell you it ain't healthy to buy chips in another's man's game?"

BARTON slumped into the chair, cold fear clutching his heart. He'd never before seen Breed Mantell, but he hadn't a doubt in the world but that he was looking at the man now. Denny McClure had described him and named him as the man his mother had unmasked. Then if this was Mantell they must have caught young Denny McClure—found him with a B Bar B horse in his possession.

"I got the kid," grinned Mantell as though reading Barton's thoughts. "I plugged him an' buried his carcass so it wouldn't cause no stir. Too bad he stopped here, mister. It ain't my habit to kill gents I've never seen before. But you know too much."

"I don't know a damned thing you're talking about," croaked Barton, playing for time.

If he could hold this killer off until Dell showed up— Besides the six-shooter he was never without, Dell always took along his carbine on his trips away from the ranch. And with that carbine Dell Barton seldom missed. But he must be warned before he came within range of this killing half-breed's .45.

Mantell gave a shrug to Barton's words. "Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, I didn't come here to argue with you, feller. I came to kill you—close your mouth! If you do know somethin' it won't go no further. If you don't—well, you gotta die sometime."

The callous words jolted Barton. He knew that he was facing a killer, but he didn't know that any man could be so cold-blooded and emotionless about it. He stared into Mantell's muddy eyes and in them he could read no hope. The man intended to kill him in spite of anything he could say. His mind was made up. Realization of this fact brought a change over Barton.

The fear drained out of him and hatred came. He suddenly forgot all about Dell following along the swale toward the house. He forgot everything except a reckless contempt and a hatred that brought words tumbling from his lips.

"You mangy, murdering skunk!" he shouted, springing up from his chair. "You killer of women and kids! Shoot and be damned to you!"

"Know me, do you?" grinned Mantell, his muddy eyes hard on Barton's face, watching him closely.

"I know you," admitted Barton. "I know about you murdering Hobe McClure and his wife up in Kamima Valley. Now you're fixing to murder

me. Well, go ahead, you black-skinned rattler! I can't stop you, but I can haunt you the rest of your life. I'll torment you and plague you! And I'll laugh when I die because I know I'm going to meet you again in hell!"

"A good way to die, feller—with a laugh," jeered the breed. "I'll laugh right along with you."

The laugh that broke from his coarse lips maddened Barton beyond control. With a howl of rage he threw himself at the breed. The gun in Mantell's hand barked twice. Barton pulled up short, wavered there and then sprawled flat on his face as a third slug ripped into his head.

Mantell stared down at him, prodded him with the toe of one boot. There was no stir of motion. Jed Barton was dead—murdered in cold blood because he had befriended a frightened, grief-stricken boy who had come down out of Kamima Valley with horror in his soul.

DELL BARTON heard those three shots just as he was topping out of the swale. He wasted no time in trying to find a reason for them. To Dell Barton gunshots meant only one thing—trouble. He sent a hot line hissing out over the backs of his team, breaking them into a run.

Sound of the approaching wagon came to Breed Mantell as he slipped out the back door of the house. A surprised curse fell from his lips. He hovered there in back of the house momentarily, then snarling like a cornered wolf he made a dash for the chaparral thicket where he'd left his horse.

As he broke away from the house he threw a glance over his shoulder, saw that only one man was in the approaching rig and pulled up long enough to take a snap shot at him. The distance was too great for accurate gun work. The bullet kicked up a puff of dust directly in front of the running team. They shied away from it and slid to a halt as Dell Barton sat back on the reins.

With movements so deliberate they seemed slow, Dell Barton reached for his carbine, threw the butt against his right shoulder. He looked down across the sights at the stocky figure of Mantell who had again taken flight at sight of the carbine. Mantell was almost to the thicket when the .30-30 in Dell Barton's hand spoke.

Mantell stumbled and pitched headlong to the ground. Dell Barton lowered his gun, wasted one long glance at the inert figure and again hazed his team toward the house. Excitement and a strange dread stirred in him, yet his features were composed when he pulled to a halt beside the kitchen door and went inside.

There he paused. And for a long moment while the scene seemed to swim before his eyes he looked down at the body of his dead brother. When he again urged his body into motion it seemed wooden, without life. He stooped, gathered Jed Barton into his arms and carried him into the other room where he laid him on the bed they'd shared the past three years.

He lingered there beside the bed, his mind too numb with his silent grief to be active. It was almost dark in the room before he finally stirred himself and went outside. Heavy dusk hung over the place like a shroud, but the air was cool. Dell's mind started to clear, asking questions.

He went to the body of Breed Mantell, rolled him over and stared long into the dark, oily face that was strange to him. He straightened after a moment and continued along the general course Mantell had been following when he dropped. A hundred feet brought Dell to a long-legged roan horse tied in the chaparral thicket. The dusk was so heavy in here that he had to strike a match to make out the Block X brand that had been burned on the roan.

The brand was a clue, but it was far from an answer to the puzzle that was seething in his mind. The iron belonged to Bruce Scanlin up in Kamima Valley. This knowledge left the

motive for the killing still a mystery. So far as Dell knew, Bruce Scanlin had no reason for sending one of his men down here gunning for his brother and him.

They knew the big cowman only through hearsay. Neither one of them had ever met him. They'd had no contact with the Block X crew except for the few rare times they'd seen them in a saloon in Mesa Verde, washing the dust out of their throats after the beef drive down to the railroad.

Rumor had it that Scanlin was having his troubles with nesters who had taken a notion to migrate into Kamima Valley and squat on land he'd laid claim to for twenty years or more. Dell knew that his and Jed's little spread which amounted to little more than two homesteads would be looked upon as a nester outfit by any real cowman. But their little B Bar B outfit was not in Kamima Valley. It was far below the boundaries of the Block X and could in no way be looked upon as an affront to the Scanlin interests.

Questions without answers darted back and forth in Dell's mind as he retraced his steps to the house. Only one thing stood out and it had little meaning. A man riding a Block X horse had killed Jed Barton and in turn, Dell had killed him. What the next move was to be Dell didn't know. But a plan, wild and reckless, was fast forming in his mind.

Unloading his supplies, he drove the wagon back to the barn where he unhitched the team and turned them loose in a small pasture. In a pole corral adjacent to the barn he roped out his sorrel saddle horse, and hazed the other horses in the corral into the pasture with the driving team. After tying the sorrel to a manger in the barn and pushing down feed, he returned to the house where he prepared the body of his brother for burial.

The spot he chose for the grave was beneath the gnarled, sheltering limbs of a great black oak that stood out from the front of the house. When the task was finished he fashioned a wooden cross which he used to mark the head of the grave.

His movements were mechanical, deliberate, as he went about straightening up the house and locking it up tight. It was close to midnight when he finally loaded the body of Breed Mantell onto the Block X horse and roped it in place. He tied a blanket and a light supply of grub behind his own saddle and led the sorrel from the barn. Picking up the lead rope he'd placed on the Block X roan, he mounted the sorrel and struck west toward the slopes that would lift him over the divide and into Kamima Valley.

CHAPTER II

Coyote Cargo

KAMIMA was a homely town of drab, weathered shacks and false-fronted buildings huddled against the south end of the wide, fertile valley which was cupped and sheltered high in the Buckeye Mountains. The town had mushroomed into existence when the rush for gold was on. But after a short, roaring life it was left to mould and decay when the boom petered out and the restless, gold-greedy inhabitants moved on to newer fields.

For years its only inhabitants were pack rats and varmints. It was fast degenerating into cobwebs and oblivion when rediscovered by Bruce Scanlin, a shrewd, ambitious cowman who saw in the valley an ideal setting for a cow ranch. Scanlin started out with a homestead, and in three years he'd reached out to claim the best of the valley as his own.

By the time other settlers got wind of his mountain retreat and started their migration, Scanlin had the strength to fight them off. He forced them to settle in the smaller valleys that fingered out from his chosen do-

main or allotted them sites on the hill land he had no use for.

Later, to assure his hold on the valley, he played politics to get a long government lease and the threat of open warfare passed. Scanlin married and prospered from the influx of settlers. For they brought new life to the deserted town, created a demand for the reopening of business houses.

With this solid foundation to build from, Kamima became a permanent fixture on the map. It seemed to prosper despite the fact that it was more or less isolated except for the weekly stage which connected it with Mesa Verde, the county seat lying seventy miles to the south and east.

A village government was set up with Bruce Scanlin at the head of it, and for more than twenty years peace reigned in the valley. From his marriage Scanlin hoped for a son to bear his name and shoulder responsibilities when age should mellow him. Instead, a girl was born; a daughter named Verda who was destined to be an only child.

This was one of the few disappointments in Bruce Scanlin's life. He felt it so deeply that each barren year took its toll. And by the time Verda was twenty Bruce Scanlin was an old man, white-haired and broken in spirit.

Scanlin's great disappointment had reflected itself in his daughter, shaping her character during her growing, impressionable years. Maturity found her a tall girl with a slender body and a lovely face. She was entirely feminine, yet necessity had taught her to sit a good saddle. The girl knew the value of beef on the hoof, and issued orders to men in a way that they would take without resentment. Verda Scanlin was capable as well as beautiful, and, at twenty, enjoyed almost complete control over the big Block X.

With his elderly wife Scanlin had removed to the town itself. He liked to spend his time in the company of other oldsters who looked upon Kamima as a quiet little hamlet which they had shaped with their own hands.

Few newcomers came to the town except for drifters who passed through every season. Among the few who stayed were Rufus Kegley and his nineteen year old son. They lazed around the town for a week, and then became permanent fixtures when the older Kegley bought out and took possession of Kamima's one saloon.

After that the town was never quite the same, although Kegley was a good mixer and seemed a solid citizen. His one vice was poker and his luck was sometimes phenomenal, especially when he was hooked up in a game with Bruce Scanlin, which was increasingly often.

UNLIKE his father, Lance Kegley's tastes ran neither to liquor nor cards. He established his independence by hiring on with Scanlin's Block X outfit. Verda Scanlin found him to be a good hand even though she had no liking for his persistent attentions which came to be an obsession with him. It was as though he was being driven by a force not entirely his own.

A year of this and she was ready to fire him off the ranch. But about that time trouble came and she found herself in need of every available hand. Scanlin had grown so accustomed to having things his own way that he forgot all about the lease he had with the government. When it expired the government immediately threw the lease open for settlement, without giving Scanlin an opportunity to renew or purchase the land outright.

Almost overnight history repeated itself. An invasion of homeseekers arrived in Kamima Valley. But this stampede was not so easily turned as the one Scanlin had fought out more than twenty years ago. There was little good free land left outside the valley, and these settlers had determined to file their claims and reap

the benefit of Scanlin's improvements.

It was a bitter pill for the old man to swallow. He'd used the valley so long he'd come to look upon it as his own. He bellowed like a wounded bull and was loud in his threats. But this gang was not to be bluffed. They were a hard outfit. A few of them brought their families, but most of them came alone ready to fight for this opportunity of filing upon fertile lands.

Balked in his attempt to bluff, Scanlin thought of using force. But he realized he couldn't start shooting these unwanted settlers as he would a smelly band of sheep. Finally he resorted to the only visible means of holding his own. He took his case to the courts contending that the valley was his by prior rights.

It was then that he entered into his first open clash with his daughter. The reckless fire of youth coursed through Verda Scanlin's veins. It instilled her with the urge to fight for what she considered theirs by right of prior settlement and development throughout the years.

"I won't give up so easily," she asserted, her brown eyes snapping angrily. "It's plain robbery and I won't stand for it. I'll fight first!"

"How?" inquired Scanlin mildly.

"With guns if necessary!"

He shook his head. "I've thought of that. The country is changing, Verda. We no longer make our own laws and enforce them with a gun."

"We can shoot to scare them, can't we?" she challenged. "Anyway, there is no law up here except Scanlin law. At least that is what I was brought up to believe." She looked at him narrowly. "Have you gone completely soft, Dad? It isn't like you to let a flock of sod-busters run a sandy on you. This valley is ours. We worked for it, built it up. We stand within our rights when we fight for it!"

"That's a point only the courts can decide."

"Courts!" she scoffed. "Before the courts get around to ruling on it these land-grabbers will have this valley ruined. Possession is nine points of the law, and I intend to see that the Scanlins hang onto that possession. I've got a crew of six and I can hire more. From the looks of some of the drifters who have filtered into Kamima lately, I might be able to hire a few who really know what guns are for."

Scanlin looked at her sharply. Beneath it all he admired her spunk, and perhaps for the first time in her twenty years of life he was looking at her without wishing she were a boy. Still, range troubles and mixing up with a crew of gunmen was no job for a girl.

He shook his head. "You've done well at the ranch, Verda. But bossing a crew like our boys and keeping the whip hand over a crew of gunmen are two different things. No woman can do that."

Splotches of anger stained her cheeks. "Do you think because I'm a woman that I'm not capable; that I haven't the nerve to go through with what I start!"

"On the contrary, my dear. You have the nerve and the determination to go through with almost anything. But under pressure no woman's judgment can be trusted. A woman is a slave to her emotions. She acts upon impulse and then regrets her mistake when it is too late. I don't want you making any mistakes that will torment your conscience."

THEY matched stares. The girl's features tightened, her chin took on a determined set, and then she was showing him her back as she strode proudly out of the room. Scanlin watched her go with a vague feeling of defeat. He hadn't turned her from her purpose. Instead his opposition had only tended to strengthen her determination. She was taking the bit in her teeth. Scanlin, not wishing to widen the breach between them, decided to let her have her head.

It was characteristic of him that

once he made his decision he asked no questions. He offered no protest when, during the following week, he heard talk of the Block X crew riding in a compact group from squatter to squatter issuing warnings. Then came whispers of night raids, burnings and strange disappearances of some of the squatters.

Scanlin heard all this and said nothing. If he had any opinions he kept them to himself. But it was noticeable that he was spending more of his time playing poker and drinking more than was his custom in Kegley's place. He was in Kegley's place the day Dell Barton arrived in town.

Night was black around Kamima when Dell tied up in front of Kegley's saloon and went inside. Dell had purposely delayed his arrival in the town until it was shrouded with darkness. His purpose for being here was not friendly, and the night would aid him in case things broke too fast for him.

A glance around the barroom showed Dell five men sitting in a game of draw and four others lounging at the bar. He joined those at the bar, and when the bartender came up he ordered rye. There was little interest shown him beyond a casual inspection. The bartender set bottle and glass in front of him and moved away.

Dell splashed whisky into his glass, eyed it with speculation a moment and tossed it off. The bartender had paused in front of the other four drinkers and all were now watching him. Dell jerked his head and the barman moved back toward him.

"I'm looking for the Block X," said Dell.

The bartender gave him a narrowed glance. "Start ridin' in any direction except south from this town an' you'll be on it. The buildings are four miles straight up the valley."

"Thanks," muttered Dell. He started to turn away when stopped by the bartender.

"The drink," reminded the barkeep. "We're hospitable here in Kamima, but not on first sight."

Dell turned. The poker game had come to a pause. All eyes were now upon him, weighing him. Dell didn't like the atmosphere of the place, and a quick, reckless resentment flared in him. To him it seemed an issue had been made of his oversight and he was quick to follow it up. An impulsive notion flashed through his mind and he mouthed it.

"Charge the drink to Bruce Scanlin," he said bluntly.

"Scanlin!"

The surprised word fell from the bartender's mouth and he shot a quick glance to the card table. Two men got to their feet. One was an oldster with white hair and a seamed, puzzled face. The other man's lean, bony body rose a head taller. Above shoulders that had an odd droop was a long, scrawny neck and a cavernous face as expressionless as a mask.

The bartender pointed to the white-haired man.

"That's Scanlin there." And as an afterthought he added: "Maybe you didn't know that?"

"I didn't," admitted Dell frankly. He moved across the floor to where Scanlin stood and eyed him quizzically. "So you're Scanlin?" he said as though a little surprised at what he saw.

The cowman frowned. "I don't believe I know you, stranger."

"You will," promised Dell. "I've got a friend of yours waiting outside. I'll fetch him in."

HE turned. A half dozen strides took him to the door. There was no protest, not even from the bartender who was still unpaid for the drink. When Dell reappeared the room was the same as he'd left it. He pushed in through the doors with the body of Breed Mantell draped across his shoulder. He strode straight across to Bruce Scanlin and dropped the corpse at his feet.

"I reckon this is your carrion, Scanlin," he said softly.

A hush lay over the room for a long moment. Then chairs scraped back as the other three card players got to their feet. The four men at the bar crowded in close. Scanlin stared down at the body of Breed Mantell in puzzled fashion. The tall man with the cavernous face showed a shocked surprise for a fleeting second. Then his bony features settled back into their bleak mask.

Dell missed none of these reactions. He'd moved back a pace and was watching them with eyes that were cold and alert. His body was relaxed; his hands hung loosely at his sides. To experienced eyes that watched him covertly he had the earmarks of a "gun-handy" with a cold nerve and a disconcerting habit of forcing his own plays.

"Breed Mantell!" ejaculated one of the card players.

Scanlin looked up, stared straight into Dell's eyes.

"You've made a mistake, stranger. This man is no friend of mine. I scarcely know him except for the time or two I've seen him here in town."

"Then maybe you can tell me why he was forking a Block X horse?" retorted Dell, driving his gaze hard against Scanlin's.

The cowman gave a start and a shadow passed over his eyes. The tall man scowled, moved into the foreground.

"Stranger," he said, "you blunder in here with the body of Breed Mantell an' start askin' questions. Suppose you start answering a few."

Dell slanted his gaze at the new speaker. What he saw he instinctively didn't like.

"And who might you be?" he challenged.

"The name is Kegley. I own this place."

"I see," mused Dell thoughtfully. "Maybe this oily breed was a friend of yours?"

"I knew him," admitted Kegley. And after a brief pause he added: "I knew him well enough to be a little curious about how come he was killed an' who done it."

"We'd likewise like to hear why you fetched him in here," spoke up a man named Tobin who was one of the four who had been standing at the bar.

Dell gave the speaker a sharp glance and saw a short, wiry little man of uncertain age whose features were pinched and stony. Twin guns sagged from his hips in polished, tilted holsters. Dell experienced a secret satisfaction. There was nothing like a surprise to bring the right parties out in the open. He'd come to the saloon in search of information and he was getting it piece by piece in a veiled, reluctant way.

HARLEY TOBIN'S query was not casual. He had a wholehearted interest in the killing of Breed Mantell, as did Kegley and the other three hard-faced individuals who had crossed over from the bar. Oddly enough Bruce Scanlin was showing the least interest of any of them. He stood there saying nothing. There was a ponderous expression on his face as though he was entirely absorbed in his own thoughts. Dell turned back to him, jolted him out of his brooding silence with his next words.

"I fetched him in here," drawled Dell, answering Tobin's question first, "because I wanted to get a good look at the man who hires that kind of scum."

"I don't—"

Scanlin started to protest, but broke off abruptly and clamped his lips tight. Again Kegley came to his rescue, took the initiative.

"Well, you've had your look, stranger," he said evenly. "You've likewise had a drink on the house. Now suppose you give yourself a name."

"Barton," complied Dell without

hesitation. "My B Bar B outfit lies east of here down in the foothills. I'll be going back there when I find out why this Block X skunk rode down there and whittled down my brother in cold blood!"

His words jolted the room. A dull, heavy silence followed them. Dell let it run, sensing the undercurrent of suppressed emotions. There was something here he didn't understand. Something ominous, menacing, yet as the silence lengthened no man stepped forward to challenge him. Dell baited them further.

"In case you haven't guessed it, I'm the man who cut down your breed friend. I flushed him as he was trying to make his getaway. He had his chance and missed. I didn't miss. If murdering my brother was the breed's own, personal notion I reckon the book is closed. But if somebody else was behind that notion there'll be some more scalps hanging from my belt before I leave here."

"You talk mighty straight, Barton," said Scanlin, sounding his voice for the first time in many long seconds.

"I shoot the same way, Scanlin!"

The answer was blunt; a flat statement of fact made by a man who was sure of himself and determined to play out his hand no matter what the odds. He stood there letting them digest his words, waiting for reaction. None came. Their stares were heavy yet none made a hostile move. Something was holding them back. For some reason he could not explain at the moment, Dell got the hunch that the check rein on their emotions was Bruce Scanlin.

His back was broad and indifferent when he turned it upon them and made his way out of the saloon. He mounted up at the hitchrack and rode down to the stable, leaving the Block X roan tied at the rack. The roan was now Scanlin's worry, not his. He'd delivered horse and man to Scanlin and it was now the cowman's next move.

After stabling his horse Dell got a room at the hotel where he washed the trail dust from his face and hands. He was back on the street a short time later looking for a restaurant.

CHAPTER III

Drygulch Trap

DELL was halfway through his meal when Bruce Scanlin came into the restaurant. Without hesitation the cowman bent his steps toward Dell and straddled a stool next to him. Dell shot him an oblique glance and nodded. Scanlin spoke.

"Barton," he said without preamble, "I'd like to know more about that killing."

"So would I," answered Dell bluntly.

"You mean you told all you know?"

"Yes."

Dell put down his knife and fork and turned so he was directly facing the cowman.

"Scanlin," he said evenly, "I don't know what your game is, but don't figure me for a pair of deuces. In the saloon a while back you claimed you only knew Mantell by sight and yet he was forking a Block X horse when he rode down to my place. It's your word against the horse and I'll take the horse."

"I spoke the truth," asserted Scanlin.

Dell scowled. "That doesn't make sense. The man was on your payroll, wasn't he?"

Scanlin shifted uncomfortably under the direct questioning. His aged cheeks paled a little and he seemed to struggle with some inner problem all his own. His answer was slow in coming.

"That's a question I can't answer right now, Barton."

It was Dell's turn to be puzzled. A flash of quick anger followed.

"You talk like a man on the weed, Scanlin," he rasped. "There's a reason why my brother was killed. When I came here tonight I figured Mantell might be the only one who knew that reason. Now I know different. There's something around this town that stinks, and I aim to stay here till I find out what it is. I'm only one man against your whole spread, but you'll find it no picnic blasting me out of this valley."

Scanlin's eyes clouded. His shoulders drooped as though they had suddenly taken on a heavy load.

"I can only say this, Barton," he muttered. "I gave Mantell no orders to ride out of this valley and kill your brother. Nobody at the Block X gave him any such orders. If he did kill your brother it was for reasons entirely his own or because someone not connected with the Block X issued the command."

"Who?" challenged Dell. "Jed had no enemies up in here that I know of."

"Somebody from your own lower country then," suggested Scanlin. "Mantell is an outsider. He hasn't been here long."

"Maybe," grunted Dell. "But, like I said, there's something around here that stinks."

Scanlin said no more. He got up from his stool and retraced his steps to the street. Dell went back to his eating. The waiter who had been hovering near the lower end of the counter came up, paused to consider Dell a moment and said:

"Funny what whisky and cards will do for a man. Right now the Block X has got more trouble with nesters than they know what to do with. And all old Bruce does is to squat here in town and lap up whisky while his daughter runs the spread."

Dell looked up, stared across the counter at the man.

"You mean Scanlin's daughter ramrods the Block X!" he ejaculated.

"Sure. Verda has ramrodded the Block X quite a spell now. And she's plenty capable. From what I hear she's making it plenty miserable for the nesters. She's got the fight that old Bruce used to have. But, hell, bossing a crew of gunmen ain't no job for a girl."

Dell pushed back his plate. He'd lost all appetite for the rest of his food. So that was why Scanlin was covering up—why he wouldn't admit Breed Mantell had been on the Block X payroll. He probably didn't know. If his daughter was ramrodding the spread she was probably doing her own hiring and firing. Scanlin had told the truth then, when he said he only knew Mantell by sight.

THE waiter's loose words gave a pretty good explanation to Scanlin's actions. Dell paid for his meal and made his way out of the restaurant. His mind was entirely occupied with Bruce Scanlin's daughter. What sort of girl could Verda Scanlin be to hire killers like Mantell? The low morals of the breed were written plainly upon his oily face. Nobody who could read human nature could have missed it.

He thought of the four hard-faces he'd seen in Kegley's saloon. He wondered if they, too, were on the Block X payroll, their guns hired by Verda Scanlin. He thought of Kegley, wondered where he fit into the picture.

His steps had been taking him down the dark street toward the hotel and the stable beyond. With the last building on this side of the street he came to the end of the raised, board walk. His thoughts were not of himself and he stepped off the raised walk without realizing he'd come to the end of it. The extra six inches that his foot traveled with his weight thrown on it jolted him. He stumbled, almost fell.

The act probably saved his life. Across the street a shot rang out and a bullet whistled through the space where he'd been a split second be-

fore. Instinctively he dropped flat, snaking out his own gun.

Another shot blasted the dark street, but it was farther down toward the stable and the bullet screamed nowhere in Dell's immediate vicinity. Following hard on the report of the gun a stifled yell ripped across the night air and a running horse came up the street toward Dell.

He hugged the ground close, his gun handy for instant use. In front of him a horse went by, running loose with an empty saddle and trailing reins. Down the street two more shots crashed. A lesser man would have let it stand at that and faded back off the street, thankful that the bullet that had come in search of him had missed.

But Dell Barton's temper was ever smoldering. It was his nature to force the play instead of backing off from it. That first shot had involved him in this shooting and he meant to follow it through.

He came to his feet while the last two shots were still echoing along the street. He started down there on a slow trot, his eyes straining to pierce the darkness ahead of him. Behind him came the rumble of excited yells as men belched from the saloon and general store.

To the right of Dell and a little ahead of him an orange flame licked out. The bullet tugged at his brush jacket and passed on. The gun in Dell's fist bucked twice, one bullet aimed to the right of the flash and the other to the left. Whether or not they found their mark he could not tell for his left foot dug against a prone body in the street and he stumbled and pitched headlong.

The fall shook him up, ground dirt into the side of his face. He pulled himself to his feet a little dazed and was still standing there when men crowded close around him. A match was struck, held close to his face.

"It's that Barton duck!" a voice exclaimed.

A second match flared and another voice sang out.

"This other one is old Bruce Scanlin!"

DELL stood there with his gun still cupped in his fist and watched them mill around. Another match flared and Dell saw a man with a marshal's badge pinned to his vest standing directly in front of him.

"What was all the shooting about?" demanded the officer. "Was it you doing it?"

"Some of it," admitted Dell.

"What the hell goes on here?"

Dell recognized the voice of the late comer as Kegley's. The saloonman crowded into the middle of things and was soon down on his knees beside Scanlin. His examination was brief.

"Hit heavy but still breathing," was his verdict. "Couple you gents better take hold of him an' take him up to my place where we can have some light."

"Take him over to Doc Rover's house," cut in the marshal.

"Oh, hello, Danby. You here?" ejaculated Kegley. "What's all the stir? Who was mixed up in it besides Scanlin?"

"The fellow Barton for one," grunted the marshal.

"Barton!" snorted Kegley and stepped close.

Dell couldn't see the man's face plainly, but he could guess at its expression by the tone of Kegley's voice.

"Well, Barton, you came here looking for Scanlin. It looks like you got him."

"That the way it looks to you?" responded Dell softly.

"That's the way it looks to a lot of us," came back Kegley.

"Mind naming a few? Or don't you want to commit yourself that much, Kegley?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that seven bullets were buzzing around this street and they

didn't all come from my gun. I carry five loads and there's three of them still good."

"Here's Scanlin's gun," said a man, moving into the center of things and handing the marshal a six-shooter. "Found it laying beside Scanlin."

Under the light of a match the marshal examined the gun.

"Two busted caps," he pronounced.

He put out his hand for Dell's gun and examined it.

"Same thing here," he said. "That accounts for four shots. Who cut loose with the other three?"

That was a question several of the spectators were thinking. The circle widened as men drew away to search for a third person. Marshal Danby turned to Dell.

"Might be well if you loosened up and told what you know about this fracas, Barton," he invited. "Did you and Scanlin swap lead?"

"Why ask fool questions?" protested Kegley. "The sign is plain as hell."

Before any further words could pass between the three a yell rose from the spot where Dell had loosed two shots.

"Here's another!" the voice said. And after a pause while a match was struck: "It's Harley Tobin!"

"Hunh!"

A surprised grunt escaped Kegley. He pulled away from Dell and the marshal to stride over to the spot where two nesters had come upon the body of Tobin. The body was lying just off the road in a wide, vacant lot next to the stable. A bullet through the heart had snuffed out Tobin's life in one, quick stroke.

The crowd shifted uneasily. The nesters pulled off into a group by themselves.

"This place ain't healthy," one of them complained. "First it was night riders an' strange disappearances an' now it's killings. I'm gettin' outa this damn valley."

"Don't lose your guts," growled a nester called Crump. "This gent ain't one of our crowd."

"Maybe not," spoke up another. "But, like Horner says, this place ain't healthy. Hobe McClure was no quitter, but him an' his wife an' kid all disappeared over night. Where'd they get to? An' what happened to Parker an' Harkins? They disappeared just like McClure."

"All right, you yellow-bellies," snapped Crump. "If you aim to quit, now is a good time to do it. Me, I aim to stay here permanent."

CRUMP didn't know the stark truth of those words as he uttered them. Dell was an interested listener to this side issue. He forgot for the moment all about Tobin and Kegley and Scanlin. Marshal Danby's voice coming directly at him brought him back to the issue at hand.

"You better come along with me, Barton. I've got some questions to ask you."

Dell had relinquished his gun to the marshal. There seemed nothing else to do now except go with the man. They turned away, started up the street toward the main part of town. But when they'd covered half a block the marshal bent off into a side street.

"Where to?" questioned Dell.

"Doc Rover's house. I want to see how Scanlin is making out."

Then he did an odd thing. He handed Dell back his gun.

"Better slide this back into your holster," he said.

Dell emitted a short laugh. "Aren't forgetting, are you, that I'm supposed to have gunned Scanlin?"

"I follow my own hunches," stated Danby. "I saw you talking with Scanlin in the restaurant. I had a short talk with Scanlin when he came out and at that time he wasn't packing a gun!"

"I noticed the same thing," muttered Dell, his opinion of the marshal changing considerably from his first impression. "I likewise noticed that there was no belt or holster on Scanlin when they found him in the street

a while back. Does he go around with a gun stuffed into his pants or somewhere when he takes a notion to pack one?"

"I wouldn't know," grunted Danby. "I've never seen Scanlin pack a gun. When he left me he said he was going down to the stable to get a horse and ride out to the Block X. Who shot at you, Barton, and who were you shooting at?"

"I can't answer either question," said Dell. "It was too dark. But I'm damn well convinced that Scanlin and I were doing no shooting at each other. His horse passed me with an empty saddle before I opened up. I stumbled over Scanlin when I was running down the road to see what the trouble was."

"Then it must have been one of your slugs that killed Tobin."

"Might have been. Have you taken time out to wonder what Tobin was doing down there?"

"I haven't missed anything," stated Danby.

"Any ideas?" Dell asked.

"I'm keeping them to myself. You're a stranger here, Barton. Right now I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. If Scanlin dies I'll have to hold you till this thing is cleared up."

"I won't be hard to find," promised Dell.

They learned little at the doctor's house. Doc Rover was working on his patient and Verda Scanlin had been sent for.

"What kind of a girl is this daughter of Scanlin's?" Dell questioned Danby on their way back to the main part of town.

"The best," stated Danby staunchly.

"Then where's the hitch?" puzzled Dell. "How come she hires scum like Breed Mantell?"

The marshal's manner underwent a quick change.

"Don't get too ambitious, Barton," he cautioned, meaningly. "This is Kamima Valley and we do things our own way up here."

After that he closed up like a clam. When Dell took leave of him he started toward the hotel. Instead of turning in there, however, Dell continued on to the stable where he got his horse and rode out of town. One attempt had been made upon his life this night. There was no use inviting another by staying here in town.

He bedded down against the hills a mile south of the town, but sleep was a long time in coming. His thoughts ran rampant. There were too many things he didn't understand. He wondered who had tried to kill Scanlin and why. Obviously they had thought to make a double killing of it, making it appear that he and Scanlin had shot it out. But the marksmanship had been poor. The thing had backfired and the only one killed was a gunman named Tobin.

Thinking of Tobin brought Kegley to his mind. There was a connection between the two. Dell had sensed that in the saloon just as he had sensed there was a connection between Kegley and Breed Mantell. The man Kegley had him puzzled. Where did he fit into the picture? If he had engineered the shooting of Scanlin, what lay behind it?

These were questions he couldn't answer and his thoughts turned to Verda Scanlin. He found it hard to think of her and Breed Mantell at the same time. He found it hard to believe there was a connecting link between these two, yet there was no denying it. He'd heard enough and seen enough to prove this. A rabid desire to meet the girl rankled in him. He promised himself he'd pay her a visit on the morrow.

CHAPTER IV

Nester's Nemesis

DELL was eating breakfast with a nester named Amby the next morning when the squatter he'd heard called Horner came bursting into Amby's tent. Horner was pan-

icky, pale with fright. In broken phrases he told of a night of horror.

"There was three of them," he blurted. "They routed me out of bed early this morning before daylight an' made me go along with them. They sneaked up on Crump first an' dragged him outa bed. After beating him they stuck a rope around his neck an' strung him up. They got Arlen next an' then Jackson."

"They had my hands tied and a gag in my mouth. I had to stand there and watch them," His voice quavered violently. "I never seen anything like it. I—I'm gettin' out of here! The sun ain't never going to set on me in this cursed valley!"

Stark fear shone from his eyes. He was completely unnerved.

There was a rumble of hoofs and four more nesters rode up, pulling a sharp halt outside the tent. They looked at Dell suspiciously and then said to Horner.

"We come by Crump's place. He ain't nowhere around. Jackson and Arlen ain't nowhere to be found, neither. You sure you didn't have a bad dream an' imagine you seen them killings, Horner?"

"So help me, I did!" said Horner. "Crump was hangin' to a tree just outside his place the last I seen of him. An' Arlen an' Jackson were layin' dead in their tents where they'd been clubbed to death."

"Then where are their bodies?" questioned one of the four.

"Where are the bodies of others that have disappeared?" countered Amby. "Horner is right. This valley is cursed. I don't mind fighting if I can see what I'm fighting. But when men die and disappear—"

Amby, who had been a genial enough host a moment before, now brushed Dell out of his way and started throwing his belongings together.

"It's going to take me just an hour to get my team hitched an' my junk loaded," he declared. "To hell with this place! I'm going back down where there's some law. When I get there I aim to see that the law comes up here to smoke out Scanlin an' his crew of murderers."

"Scanlin," pointed out Dell, "was shot last night. He couldn't very well lead a gang of killers around the valley."

"It's that damn, hellion girl of his!" exploded Amby. "She bosses the outfit."

"Was she one of those three last night?" Dell questioned Horner.

"Not unless she was dressed like a man."

"You recognize any of them?"

"They all wore masks."

"Then how do you know they were Block X men?"

"Their horses were Block X. Anyway, who else would be ridin' around killing us?"

"I dunno," admitted Dell. "What was their idea of taking you around with them and then turning you loose?"

"They wanted me to see it. They said it was a warning of what we'd all get if we didn't quit this valley today."

"And so you're taking that warning and quitting, are you?"

The answer to his question was plain in the eyes of all of them. By night every settler there would be on his way out of Kamima Valley. Dell looked at his unfinished breakfast, slanted a glance at Amby bustling around and went out to where his horse stood ground-tied. He mounted and rode away, reining his horse in the direction of the Block X buildings.

THE Block X house had been built for both comfort and show. It rose white and domineering at the end of a shaded lane that was lined on both sides with tall, stately poplar trees. Dell's hail brought a man up from the big barn that stood to the west of the house.

Except for the Chinese cook Lance Kegley was the only man at the

ranch. Three of the crew were away on routine jobs. The other two had ridden into town with Verda the previous night and had not yet returned.

Physically there was no resemblance between Lance Kegley and his father. Lance's features were cut clean, his gaze was direct and he stood up well under Dell's close inspection.

"Scanlin's daughter around?" Dell inquired of him.

"Who's asking for her?" challenged Lance bluntly.

Dell took another long look at the youth and showed him a thin grin.

"Suppose I come right back at you, kid, and ask who wants to know?"

"My name is no secret," answered Lance. "My name is Kegley, and I'm working here as a hand until a better job comes along."

"Kegley—" echoed Dell. "Any relation to the saloonman in town?"

Lance hesitated over his answer. Finally he muttered: "I'm a son."

Dell scowled another appraisal. "You don't look like an offspring of Kegley's," he grunted. "But then you never can tell by looking at a tree what kind of fruit it's going to bear. You've probably got the same kind of core."

"What do you mean by that?" questioned Lance sharply.

"You'll probably get a better idea if I tell you my name is Barton."

There was no change of expression on Lance's face. Dell waited a minute and added: "The name mean anything to you?"

"No."

"You disappoint me," muttered Dell. "How much hell has a man got to raise in this valley before he gets popular? Didn't word come out of town that it was me who tried to salt down old Scanlin?"

"Suppose it did?"

Dell pointed a long forefinger at the gun sagging from Lance's hip.

"Then why are you so bashful about drawing a hand, Kegley? Maybe you aren't patriotic?"

"Maybe I'm not a damned fool," countered Lance.

"Maybe," drawled Dell, "you favor the dark and a man's back, like your old man."

Quick anger streaked across Lance's face. "If you're trying to crowd me into making a play you're wasting your time, Barton," he said brittlely. "All I know about you or what happened in town is what I've heard. Who you are or what your game is I don't know and don't give a damn."

"You show more sense than your old man," said Dell. "What's your capacity hereabouts? You a day rider or a night rider!"

LANCE'S eyes drove past Dell and down along the road where a rider had just turned into the lane. "You can do your talking to Verda," he said. "That's her coming there."

Dell swung to the ground and turned to watch the girl ride into the yard.

"This is Barton, Verda," Lance said in way of introduction, and reached for the reins of her horse. "I'll put up your horse."

"You'll screw the saddle on your own horse and start making tracks out of here, Lance Kegley," responded the girl, anger edging her voice. "By the time you get your gear together I'll have your money ready."

Lance's mouth sagged open. He stared at her as though he hadn't heard right.

"You mean I'm—fired!"

"That's one name for it," snapped the girl. "I want no Kegleys on this ranch any longer."

"I don't sabe—"

"Oh, yes you do. I don't know what game your father is playing or just where you fit in, but you can tell him from me it will never work. And if dad dies I'll see that Rufe Kegley and his imported gunmen hang for it!"

It was plain from the expression on Lance's face that her words cut

him. Twice he started to say something but choked back the words before they could pass his lips. Suddenly his manner changed. His jaw set and his features grew bleak.

"All right," he said hoarsely. "I'll go. But I'll leave my warbag here and I won't draw my pay because I'm coming back!"

"You better not unless you're bullet-proof!"

Lance whirled on his heel and stalked off to the barn. Dell removed his hat as the girl's eyes fell directly upon him for the first time. Her silent appraisal was cool, almost impertinent. His was puzzled and unfriendly. A long moment they weighed each other. Dell was the first to speak.

"Yesterday," he said in a voice that had a bite to it, "I delivered a corpse to your father. I made a mistake. I should have brought it here."

The effect of his words was reflected in the dark stain that flared in each cheek. Whatever her thoughts had been a moment previously, they were resentful now.

"You made a mistake," she answered in a voice that was frigid, "by coming into this valley at all."

Dell experienced a strange letdown. He'd been fostering the hope that this girl would deny that Breed Mantell had been in her employ. Temper straightened the line of his mouth, narrowed his eyes. There was something about the girl that struck sparks in him. She was too sure of herself and, though he admitted it grudgingly, Dell decided she was too pretty to be chasing around in the rough riding garb of a man. A girl like this shouldn't be bossing a crew of gunmen who rode in the night and murdered.

"You invited me here when you sent Mantell down to kill my brother," he said flatly.

"That's a lie!" she cried.

"Then what was he doing down there at my place?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"And I take it you don't care a whole lot," growled Dell.

"That question doesn't deserve an answer," she flashed back at him. "I know nothing about Mantell."

"Except that you hired him to help you rid this valley of nesters," put in Dell. "Well, what goes on here is none of my affair. I came here to learn why Mantell came down to my place and who sent him. When I find the answer to those questions somebody is going to get hurt."

"Is that supposed to be a threat against me?" she stormed back at him.

"No personal threat," he grumbled. "But I'd advise you to drag your fingers out of the fire before you get them burnt. You're fooling around in a game you don't sabe." He broke off, scowled at her in puzzled fashion and added: "Don't you ever have any bad nights when you can't sleep? I mean nights when your conscience rides and heckles you?"

HER cheeks paled a little as the meaning of his words struck her. "I know what you're thinking, but it isn't so," she cried. "My men aren't murderers!"

"No-o-o?" he drawled. "You should have been with me this morning when a duck named Horner started racing around amongst the settlers with his eyes bugged out. His tongue drooled a story about how he was hauled out of bed by three Block X hands and forced to trail along with them while they murdered three other settlers. Horner wasn't lying. I know when a man is telling the truth."

"It's a lie! None of my boys would do a thing like that!"

"It might be a good idea if you got better acquainted with those boys of yours," said Dell dryly. "A killing or two don't mean anything to men like Breed Mantell."

He turned his back on her, picked up the reins of his horse. Her hand on his shoulder turned him half

around. He looked into brown eyes that were almost black with anger.

"There's no reason why I should explain anything to you, but I'm going to," she lashed him. "Dad told me about you. He also accused me of hiring Breed Mantell and men like him. I'll answer you the same as I answered him. Breed Mantell was never on the Block X payroll. I have only my old crew and they aren't murderers!"

"Then what was Mantell doing forking a Block X horse?"

"I don't know. He probably stole it."

"Maybe those three gents last night likewise stole their Block X horses?"

"They probably did."

Dell was still pondering this when Lance Kegley rode up from the barn. Kegley gave them only a short, passing glance as he continued on his way down the lane. Dell's gaze followed the man. Presently he turned back to Verda Scanlin and found the girl's eyes were on him, studying him closely.

"Your reasons for firing that gent private ones?" he questioned.

She studied him a long time and shook her head. The fire had gone out of her and she looked at him from eyes that were no longer hostile. Instead they were clouded with trouble; worry wrinkles creased her forehead.

"I don't know why we got started off wrong," she mused. "Dad vouched for you."

"How is your father?" questioned Dell, his own manner softening.

"He's still alive and conscious. Doc Rover says it will be a close squeak for him."

"He'll make it," asserted Dell. "I'm glad he knows it wasn't me who tried to whittle him down. Some folks around town were hell-bent on trying to unload the job on me. You handed it to young Kegley pretty straight."

"Dad believes that his father, Rufus Kegley, had something to do with his being shot last night."

"He give you any reasons for thinking that?"

"None except that he has given Kegley some I.O.U.'s and has never been able to buy them back. Every time he tried to Kegley evaded the issue."

Dell's brow puckered and the girl went on to explain further.

"You see dad has been playing a lot of poker at Kegley's, and from what I can gather his luck has been all bad. We have no bank here in Kamima, you know. We have to send a man clear down to Mesa Verde when we need cash. Several times dad ran short and gave Kegley his I.O.U."

"Why didn't he write him a check on the Mesa Verde bank?"

"That's the same question I asked. Dad says that Kegley wouldn't be bothered with checks. He preferred I.O.U.'s."

DELL scratched his jaw thoughtfully. "That don't seem to make sense," he muttered. "What would Kegley gain by killing your dad?"

"I don't know. They had no trouble. Kegley insists that it was you. He says everything points that way and, in a way, it does."

"Still you don't figure I did it."

"No. Maybe that's because I don't like Rufe Kegley. I never have from the first time I saw him."

"How about his son?" questioned Dell.

"Lance seemed different. He was a good hand."

Dell experienced an odd feeling of relief. He was startled to learn that he had anxiously awaited her answer. He'd been watching her closely, looking for any change of expression that might hint at her feelings toward Lance Kegley. He'd read enough in Kegley's face to know that the youth was in love with her. But Verda Scanlin was good at covering up or

else she returned no such feeling for young Kegley.

Dell found himself picturing her in a frilly dress, a garb more in harmony with the soft, feminine lines of her body. Her change of mood had softened her features, enhancing their beauty. He liked the shape of her lips and the way the lower one curved full and inviting. With the anger gone her eyes were a reddish brown and they were looking at him in a way that made him feel suddenly awkward. He shifted nervously, groped for the lagging ends of their conversation.

"I generally can smell a skunk a mile off, and Kegley has all the earmarks," he drawled. "What his game is, I don't know. But I do know there's some connection between him and Breed Mantell. That's why somebody tried to cut me down last night at the same time they shot your dad. Kegley probably figures I know something."

"About what?"

"Well, it would be interesting to know why Mantell was riding a Block X horse, and why night riders you claim weren't your men were straddling Block X horses when they went on a killing rampage amongst the settlers. I've got a hunch who those night riders were. But what would Kegley's interest be in running these nesters out of the valley?"

She shook a confused head. "I don't know."

"There's one way of finding out," stated Dell. "I'll be riding back to town. The answer to what I want to know isn't here. It's in Kamima, and I'm thinking Kegley is the man who can tell it to me."

Quick concern showed on her features. "If they tried to kill you once they will do it again."

Involuntarily his hand dropped to the gun sagging from his hip. His hand didn't pause there, only caressed the butt. But the gesture was enough to tell her much. Dell Barton was proficient in the use of that gun and there was nothing lacking in his nerve. He was a good man to have around; a good man to tie to, lean upon, at a time like this when it seemed that trouble was all around her and things were getting beyond her control.

Verda Scanlin was capable and efficient and not easily stampeded. Nevertheless, she was a girl. At heart she didn't like the rôle she had been forced to play at the Block X. Yet in playing that rôle she'd learned to stand on her own and depend upon no man. Now, she suddenly realized, she was facing a man with a will stronger than her own; a man she could look up to and respect. In one sense he was a gunman, even though his features were cut clean and his gray eyes were clear and level and so direct in their gaze that she felt a flush steal into her cheeks.

She looked down, saw that he was offering her his hand.

"I hope we're friends," he said softly.

She put her hand in his and her grip was firm, genuine. His fingers closed and she felt the strength in him. His grip lingered, held her hand longer than was necessary, but she made no move to take her hand away first. When the pressure of his fingers finally relaxed, her color was high.

"Maybe I'll see you in town tonight at Doc Rover's house," he said. "I'll probably be wanting to have a talk with your dad by that time."

"I'll be there," she promised. And as he turned to his horse, she added: "Be careful, Dell."

He mounted and rode away from there with the sound of his name falling from her lips still tingling in his ears. He bent his horse toward Kamima, knowing that in some way he'd taken over Verda Scanlin's problems. He could feel the weight of them on his shoulders, yet instead of dragging his spirits down, they exhilarated him.

CHAPTER V

SIX-GUN SCOURGE

RUFE KEGLEY, Dutch Gilmore and Tony Shatto were sitting in Kegley's office in the back of the saloon when Lance Kegley pushed open the door and stepped inside. Kegley scowled at him.

"Folks usually knock before they come in here, kid," he growled. "What do you want "

"It ain't what I want, it's what I got," responded Lance. "I was fired off the Block X a while ago."

Kegley showed his surprise. "Thought you were sitting in solid out there. What happened?"

"Nothing happened out there. It's what came off here in town last night," muttered Lance. "You must have slipped, Kegley. The way I got it, Scanlin has a pretty good hunch who tried to knock him off last night."

"The girl say something about it?"

"Nothing except she didn't want any Kegleys hanging around the Block X."

Kegley gave a short laugh. "She won't feel so cocky, come morning. I've just about got this valley tied up in a knot. Tonight I aim to pull the strings tight."

Lance slanted him a hard, straight glance. There was no real friendliness here. Their relationship was more a wary, suspicious tolerance.

"Strikes me you've been going it roughshod, Kegley," said Lance gruffly. "I suppose you know those settlers are going to start yelling their heads off when they hit Mesa Verde. You'll have the law up here on your neck and that law won't be a dumb marshal like Danby."

Kegley gave his shoulders a careless hunch. "Let 'em yell. I'll have my hand pat before the law can get up here. Nothing can be pinned on me. It will look like trouble between the Scanlin outfit and the settlers. Even this business that comes off tonight."

"What business is that?"

"Before you go spilling your brains you better find out where this kid stands, Kegley," spoke up Tony Shatto, a dark little man with a nervous trigger finger. "He's never worked in with you on this deal, and if you ask me he's plumb soft on that Scanlin girl."

"Nobody asked you to stick your lip in, Shatto," flared Lance whirling on the speaker. "I told Kegley when we first hit this valley that I'd have no part in any of his deals if they went crooked. All I agreed to do was keep my mouth shut and let on like I was his kid. Kegley figured folks would think he was a solid citizen if he had a kid. Well, I've kept my promise, but if you try to finish what you started last night I'll make it known right out loud that I'm no kin of Kegley's and never was!"

Kegley's eyes narrowed. "That wouldn't be healthy for you, kid," he warned softly. "Not that I need you for a front any more, but there's not going to be any old skeletons dragged out here."

"Then lay off Bruce Scanlin," snapped Lance. "I didn't horn in when you were running your crooked poker on him. I figured he was old enough to look out for himself. I likewise didn't squawk when you started in on them squatters. Getting them out of here wasn't doing anybody any harm, especially Scanlin. But you overreached when you tried to knock off the old man last night, Kegley."

THEIR eyes clashed, held for a long moment. A thin smile crawled across Kegley's lips. "Kickin' over the traces, are you, kid?" he drawled. "Maybe you'd like to feel a rope around your neck?"

"I'm no fool, Kegley. I sabe what's between me and you, and I've got sense enough not to drag out any old skeletons. I've got to keep my mouth shut. You know that as well as I do. But I don't hold with this killing stuff. What's your reason for want-

ing to kill Scanlin? What do you aim to gain by it?"

"Told you when we first hit here that I'd have this valley some day," answered Kegley. "It's taken a year to shape things up right, but they're comin' to a head now. I've got some solid citizens as witnesses that Scanlin has been bucking my game for a long time. A man running in bad luck can slough off a lot of money in a year. Scanlin was fool enough to give me some I.O.U.'s in front of witnesses."

Lance nodded. "I sabe what you can do with a pen, Scanlin."

"Sure," grinned Kegley. "I can write Scanlin's signature better than he can. With Scanlin dead nobody can swear how much he lost to me. But I'll have the paper to show it was plenty—too much for the girl and her mother to raise after I take care of another little angle that I'm going to start working on pronto. When I start squeezing the girl she'll be glad enough to sell the Block X at the price I offer. I'll buy that ranch all legal and aboveboard. And I'll do it with Bruce Scanlin's money."

Again their eyes clashed. Lance's features pinched tight.

"I'll play square with you, Kegley," he said slowly. "That's why I'm telling you now where I stand. I'll plug that deal if I can."

Kegley nodded undisturbed. "I figured it that way, kid. That's why I'm taking no chances with you."

Lance had come far enough into the room so that his back was to Dutch Gilmore, who sat tilted in a chair close to the door. He suddenly realized this mistake, but too late. Gilmore had received his cue and was already on the move. As Lance whirled back toward the door Gilmore's big body struck him and rode him to the floor.

Lance fought to free his arms so he could drag his gun. He did manage to get the gun out of leather only to have it kicked out of his hand by Tony Shatto, who came up to lend a hand. After that it was only a matter of seconds before they had him bound hand and foot and a gag stuffed into his mouth.

"Might as well finish this job here and now, Kegley," said Tony Shatto.

Kegley stared at the little gunman and shook his head.

"You're a bloodthirsty devil, Tony. Never seen a man who enjoyed killing so much unless it was Breed Mantell. Keep your shirt on. You'll have your chance to stow Lance away, but it won't be here. It'll be in the dark somewhere where nobody can see or hear, an' where there'll be no bloodstains to mop up. Right now we've got other work to do.

"Roll the kid over in a corner. I'll send Link in here to keep a watch over him when we leave. You and Dutch can size things up while I have my talk with Scanlin. Remember, I want no damn bungling tonight. You boys made a mess of it before. This time I want it sure."

"You should have let me handle it alone instead of trusting it to Dutch and Tobin and Link," growled Shatto.

"It was Barton who spoiled the other play," snorted Dutch Gilmore. "He's as slippery as an eel. He's your private meat any time you want him."

"I'll take him," boasted Shatto.

"You better be gittin' around to it pretty quick," said Gilmore. "That jasper knows something. The longer he stays alive the more dangerous he is."

"WE'LL git Barton tonight after we finish with Scanlin," promised Kegley. "I got a hunch he went out to the Block X. If he did he'll probably stay there. But if he does come back into town, so much the better. Anyway, this Scanlin business comes first. You two look the ground over good. Remember you've got to take that nester we slugged in here this morning over to Doc Rover's house so he can be found there. Won-

der how he's doing? Either one of you been upstairs to see?"

"He's doin' all right," grunted Gilmore. "He's come around enough to cuss hell out of me when I fixed the gag on him a while back."

"Let's go then," ordered Kegley, and led the way out of the room.

Link Milner came in a moment later. He locked the door from the inside and rocked back in a chair to take up his watch over Lance Kegley.

Dell had put up his horse at the stable and was on his way up to the main part of town when he saw Kegley and Gilmore and Tony Shatto coming down the street on the opposite side. Dell was in front of the saddle shop and he faded into the doorway of the small building. While seeming to look at an ornamental saddle that was displayed in the window, he watched the three turn off the main street and go up to Doctor Rover's house. Kegley went inside. The other two sauntered on.

Puzzled, Dell watched them. They strolled a way past the doctor's house and then came back, lingering in the vicinity of the house. From their actions Dell judged they were waiting for Kegley to come out and gave them no more attention.

He changed his mind about putting in an appearance at Kegley's saloon, went back down the street and crossed over to the hotel. When he reached his room he found that someone had ransacked his warbag. He was not surprised. Neither was he surprised to find that nothing was missing. Somebody had merely been curious and there had been nothing in his warbag to satisfy their curiosity.

He dug out a clean shirt and an extra .45. He inspected and oiled the six-shooter, cleaned and oiled the one that sagged from his waist. He washed up then and pulled on the clean shirt. When he finally left the hotel to go to the restaurant in search of a belated noon meal, there was a short gun sagging from each of his hips. Dell Barton expected trouble and was prepared for it.

Kegley didn't stay long in Doc Rover's house. Overriding the doctor's objections, he was finally left alone with Scanlin. Doc Rover had granted him five minutes and Kegley wasted no words.

"Well, Scanlin," he said, "you got a taste last night of what kind of a gent this fellow Barton is. When he finds out it was your daughter who hired Breed Mantell, he's going to take his troubles down to the sheriff. And you ain't in any position to have the law snooping around here right now."

"Verda had no dealings with Mantell," denied Scanlin in a weak, strained voice.

"Sure. She'll tell you that," scoffed Kegley. "But you know your daughter, Scanlin. She's got a strong will and she was plumb determined to run the squatters out of this valley. She hired Mantell and a gunny partner of his to lead her night-raiding party.

"Them two and a regular Block X hand went to Hobe McClure's place one night to throw a scare into him. McClure's wife went on the fight an' jerked Mantell's mask off. The breed lost his head and killed her. After that there was nothing to do but kill the old man, too. In the excitement McClure's kid got away. They looked around the valley for him the next day, an' then figured he must have struck out for the lower country an' the law."

KEGLEY went on: "Mantell an' his partner went down after him an' finally caught up with him. The kid was riding a B Bar B horse an' they figured he'd probably told the owner of that horse his story. After they killed the kid and buried his body, Mantell set out to backtrack him, and his partner came on back to the valley here. That's the last this partner of Mantell's seen of the breed till Barton came toting his carcass in here last night."

"You know a lot, Kegley," said Scanlin when the other broke off. "Maybe too much."

"I know enough to send you and your girl up for life if the right ears hear it," boasted Kegley. "You see I've got this gunny partner of Mantell's. I beat a confession out of him this morning. He knows where McClure and his wife and all them others who disappeared are buried. He's willing to swear on oath that Verda hired him to do those killings!"

"That's a bald-faced lie!" flared Scanlin, taxing his weak voice.

"Try an' make the law believe it's a lie after the squatters who pulled out of here today reach Mesa Verde. Wait till they start yelling about the Block X hands who raided them at night," retorted Kegley. "You probably don't give a damn about yourself, Scanlin, but you sure don't want to see your daughter tried for murder!"

Scanlin glared at him from his feverish eyes. "I suppose you have a proposition to offer?"

"Well, a man has to look out for himself," grinned Kegley. "I've got some paper of yours, Scanlin. Maybe you remember? Well, I need cash on them now. I'm kinda fed up with this valley. Aim to try a new range. Now, it you could pay off them gambling debts of yours an' add, say about fifty thousand, I could leave here an' keep my mouth shut."

"Blackmail, eh?"

"Nope. Smart poker is all. You're in the pot too deep to drag out now, Scanlin. You've got to see the last card an' that's going to cost you money."

"You flatter me," said Scanlin. "I have no fifty thousand."

"How much have you got down in the Mesa Verde bank, Scanlin?"

"Possibly fifteen thousand dollars."

"I'll settle for thirty," said Kegley. "The bank will let you have the other fifteen against your beef shipment this fall. All you have to do is send a man down after it. And send him today, Scanlin." He dragged out his watch, glanced at the dial. "Doc will be running me out of here in another minute, Scanlin. You better decide fast."

"You hold all the cards, Kegley," muttered Scanlin after a brief pause. "I'll send a man down. But what assurance have I got that you'll play square?"

"My word is all. Looks like you'll have to accept that. And I'll pick the man who goes down. All you've got to do is write out the order."

"I can't write," protested Scanlin. "My hand is too shaky."

"You can scribble good enough," said Kegley and took a pencil and paper from his pocket. "Here, do your writing, Scanlin."

With Kegley holding him up in bed, Scanlin wrote. There was nothing else he could do. He knew Kegley was treacherous and was probably lying. But it was this treachery in the man that forced Scanlin to do as he willed. If he refused, there was no telling what methods Kegley would use if he went to work on Verda Scanlin. The cowman was taking the only course he knew to protect his daughter.

Part of what Kegley had said was true. The Block X would be blamed for any killings that might have happened among the nesters. Scanlin had heard whispers of such killings. He now had a good idea of who was responsible for them, but he could do nothing about it. Kegley was in a position to place those killings directly at the feet of Verda Scanlin.

CHAPTER VI

Rangehog Roundup

THERE was a gloating grin on Kegley's face when he left Doc Rover's house. "All set," he said to Gilmore and Shatto. "Got the lay of the land around here good enough so you can work in the dark?"

"It's a cinch," said Shatto. "After I blast out Scanlin, Dutch will put a

slug in the nester down close to the main street. When the crowd gathers around, Dutch will tell 'em he seen the nester running away from Doc's house. There'll be a gun in his hand with an empty load to prove it was him blasted out Scanlin. It's cut an' dried, Kegley."

They went up to the saloon where Kegley called Link Milner out of his office. He handed Milner the letter Bruce Scanlin had written to the banker in Mesa Verde.

"Get your horse and start riding for Mesa Verde, Link," ordered Kegley. "You hand this note to the banker an' he'll fork over thirty thousand bucks. That's a lot of money, but don't be tempted, Link. You try going south with that dough and I'll track you to hell! You sabe, I reckon."

"I'll fetch it back," promised Link. "I know you, Kegley."

Dell came out of the restaurant as Link passed the building on his way to the stable. Dell gave him a sharp glance, recognized him as one of the four men who had been standing at the bar when he arrived in Kamima with the body of Breed Mantell. Curiosity moved Dell to follow the man. He arrived at the stable as Link led a saddled horse from a stall into the wide runway of the barn.

"Going some place?" Dell inquired of the man, pausing in front of him.

Link gave him a hard, stony stare, his hand falling close to his gun.

"Stand out of my way before I blow you out," grated Link.

It was the wrong answer. With only guesses to work on Dell had come back to Kamima to force the slim hand he was holding. Link's words proved to Dell that he was one of the men he was looking for and he acted accordingly. His plan was to start whittling on the gang until he came to Kegley.

His quick move caught Link still off balance. Link tried to snake his gun. But it only half cleared leather before the barrel of one of Dell's guns crashed hard against the outlaw's head. He groaned and went down. A shadow darkened the doorway and Marshal Danby came into the stable. He looked at Link, then gave his attention to Dell.

"What was the meaning of that, Barton?" he questioned sharply.

Dell shrugged. "I don't rightly know. Just a notion that struck me. When the odds are heavy I start cutting them down when I come to them."

"Maybe a good idea at that," grunted Danby and stooped beside the fallen man.

His fingers went through Link's clothes and came out holding the letter Bruce Scanlin had written. He scanned its contents and quickly stuffed it into his pocket. Dell's brows pulled together, but he said nothing. Danby went to the back of the barn and returned with a bucket of cold water which he dashed into Link's upturned face. It brought results. In a few seconds Link was sitting up, staring around groggily.

Danby helped him to his feet and relieved him of his gun.

"Snap out of it, Milner," he said. "What I'm telling you better sink in. Crawl your horse and ride out of town just like you would if this little episode hadn't happened. I'll be watching. If you stop on the way or make a crooked move I'll drill you. And when you get clear of town keep going. You sabe that?"

APPARENTLY Milner did. Without argument he crawled his horse and rode up the street. Danby hovered in the doorway of the stable watching him. Dell moved to his side and together they watched Link Milner jog his horse out of town.

"That paper you took off him a secret?" drawled Dell.

Danby turned to face him. His appraisal lasted a long time. Finally he dug into his pocket and handed the letter to Dell.

"I think you're to be trusted and I might need help before this is over

with, Barton," he muttered. "I take it you know how to use those guns you're packing, and I may need a couple of handy guns when this thing I'm working on comes to a head."

Dell scanned the letter.

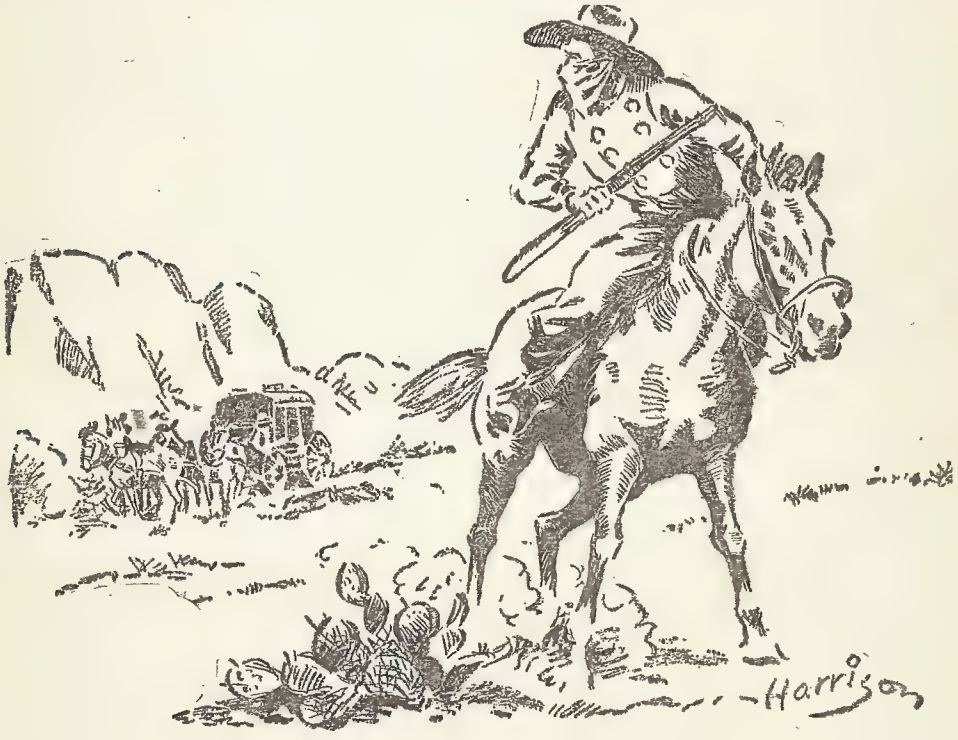
"How did you know he had this?"

"Doc Rover told me. Kegley visited Scanlin a while back. Doc left them alone. When he returned to tell Kegley it was time to go they were still talking. He didn't hear much, only enough to know that Kegley has something on Scanlin and was putting the squeeze on him for thirty thousand dollars. He heard Kegley say he'd send one of his own men down to Mesa Verde after the money, as soon as Scanlin wrote an order for it. I've been watching to see who that man was. Between the two of us we found out. I'm obliged to you."

"What has Kegley got on Scanlin?" questioned Dell.

Danby shrugged. "I wish I knew. But Scanlin won't talk. Now forget what you saw, Barton, and don't get any more notions about taking the law into your own hands. I've got a stinking hunch you're on the right trail, but when I need help I'll holler. In the meantime watch your back. That's friendly advice."

Dell watched the marshal go on his way. Then he turned his steps toward Doc Rover's house, approaching the building from a roundabout way. But he had little luck there. The doctor flatly refused to let him see Bruce Scanlin. Smothering his disappointment, he made his way back to the hotel where he stretched out on the bed to relax.



He was firmly convinced that another attempt would be made on Bruce Scanlin's life, but he didn't look for it to happen until sometime after dark. Skunks like Kegley worked better in the dark. And Dell meant to be somewhere near Doc Rover's house when the activity started. Meanwhile he saw no reason

for showing himself on the street any more than was necessary.

Verda Scanlin rode into town shortly after sundown. She went directly to Doc Rover's house where she stayed until almost dark. Then she emerged to mount her horse again and ride to the Scanlin town residence which was located on a short rise overlooking most of the town.

Doc Rover had promised her that her father could be moved to his own bed on the morrow. She told the glad tidings to her mother while they ate their evening meal. Later she pulled on her jacket and started back to the doctor's house again. She'd promised to meet Dell there.

Verda had put up her horse in the barn in back of the house, and instead of saddling him again she decided to walk the several hundred yards back to the town. The night was dark, but the path leading down was familiar to her. She went along it with quickened pulse and a strange eagerness to see again a man she'd met only that morning. Her thoughts were on him, picturing again the lean strength of his body and the even, straightforward cut of his features.

SHE heard faintly the rustle in the weeds beside the path. A second later a bulky form crashed against her, knocking her to the ground. A cloth was jammed into her mouth and a sack pulled over her head. While she fought to scream and free herself, her hands were tied behind her and she was jerked to her feet.

"Start walkin'. An' don't spit that gag an' yell or I'll have to bend a gun over your skull!" a hoarse voice commanded. "Do like you're told an' you won't git hurt. We just don't want you in the way is all."

She was pushed along and had to walk to keep from falling. Brush whipped around her legs, and she could tell by the exertion it cost her that her course lay uphill. She was forced to walk only a short distance. Then hands again laid hold of her and she was lifted off her feet. Her ankles were bound and she was placed flat on the ground.

"I reckon you'll rest easy here," the man's voice muttered. "Maybe I'll git back to turn you loose. If I don't they'll find you in the morning anyway."

She heard his footsteps die away and lay there for some minutes silently bemoaning her helplessness. But Verda Scanlin was not a girl to lose her nerve for long. She started planning a way to free herself or make her predicament known. When all efforts to slip her bonds failed she gritted her teeth, gave her body a heave and rolled down the incline.

Rocks bruised her, brush tore at her and stopped her progress. But she set her jaw all the firmer, worked herself free of the brush and rolled again until brought up short by another clump of brush.

The first streaks of darkness brought Dell out of the hotel. He went directly to the restaurant where he ate his supper. He lingered there to smoke out a cigarette and then started toward Doc Rover's house. As he had done in the afternoon, he worked toward the house in a roundabout way, circling up on the slope that rounded the end of the side street.

He had swept the main street with a searching gaze before deserting it for the dark lots. Neither Kegley nor any of his henchmen had come under his gaze, but this was not proof that he was not being watched.

Dell moved along warily. He was approaching the dead end of the street when he was startled by the sound of crackling brush on the slope above him. A gun slithered into his hand and he crouched low. The noise continued, and a moment later he jumped to one side to avoid being hit by the rolling body of Verda Scanlin. The girl came to a stop a few feet from where he stood.

He moved toward her cautiously, then suddenly dropped and laid hands on her. They came into contact with

the thong that bound her ankles. A short while later she was on her feet, swaying against him while she gasped for breath and fought for control of her reeling senses.

"What happened, Verda?"

His voice was harsh, tinged with anger and impatience. She was in no hurry to answer. She liked it there in the crook of his arm, one cheek pressed against the rough wool of his shirt. He evidently thought she was still dazed. He pushed the disheveled hair back from her forehead and his fingers lingered there.

Words finally came from her, words that stiffened him, pulled him away.

"What I figured," he exclaimed. "They're out to make another try at getting your dad. They waylaid you to keep you from getting in their way. We've got no time to lose."

He caught hold of her hand, pulled her along after him.

"You go in the Doc's house and stay out of that bedroom," he ordered her when they drew close to the front of the house. "I'll see that nothing happens to your dad."

AS THEY parted at the front of the house a man came running around the corner, almost colliding with Dell. Dell barked a command and reached for his gun. The man pulled up short.

"That you, Barton?" he gasped, his breath coming short.

The man was Lance Kegley. Verda stifled an exclamation and came up to where the two of them stood.

"What are you doing here, Kegley?" snapped Dell. "You better start talking—fast."

"I will," said Lance in a strained voice. "Listen to what I've got to say and don't ask questions. We haven't got much time. They're liable to be here any minute."

"Who's liable to be here?" barked Dell. "If you're up to any tricks, Kegley—"

"This is no trick," declared Lance, excitement stirring his voice. "Bruce Scanlin's life ain't worth a plugged nickel if we don't move fast. They're planning to finish him tonight."

"Who's planning to finish him?" snapped Dell impatiently.

"Kegley, Shatto and the others. Listen," he said, moving close to Verda. "I'm not Kegley's son. I'm no relation to him. I was in jail over in Nevada waiting to be sent up to the pen for a killing. Kegley was in the same jail on a rustling charge. We got pretty well acquainted and when he busted jail he took me with him. I've been with him ever since.

BIG BOY TAKES A TIP
BOB: Say, fellow, are you taking Ex-Lax? Thought that was for women and kids.
JIM: Wrong, Big Boy! I've been taking Ex-Lax for years. It fixes me up fine!
BOB: Oh yeah! Well, I'm pretty husky... I need a laxative with a wallop.
JIM: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax tastes good, but it's plenty effective!
LATER
BOB: Thanks for the tip, pal! I tried Ex-Lax and it's great stuff!
JIM: What did I tell you! It's the only laxative we ever use in our family.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX
THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

"But I've had no dealings in his game here. It's his men that have been making the night raids on Block X horses, so the blame would fall on you and your dad, Verda. He aims to kill your dad and then freeze you and your mother out of the ranch. I bucked him this morning and they ganged me. I've been roped and gagged in the saloon all day.

"Every time I got a chance I worked with those ropes, and a few minutes ago, just after Dutch Gilmore got back to report that he'd caught Verda and put her out of the way, I made my getaway. I came out through the window in Kegley's office. If they miss me now hell will be popping.

"Kegley is already stirred up and willing to take chances. Link Milner came back to town right after dark and told about you and Danby ganging up on him in the stable, Barton."

"Leastways, we stopped that part of the deal," grunted Dell.

He believed Lance Kegley. There was an earnestness about that man that couldn't be denied.

"You plugged nothing," contradicted Lance. "Kegley is handy with a pen. He'll write another letter and send Link down to Mesa Verde as soon as they clean up here. You came here looking for the man behind Breed Mantell, Barton. Kegley is that man. I ain't got time to tell you all the details now. But Kegley, Gilmore, Shatto, Milner, Tobin and Mantell —they were all in together. You've already taken care of Mantell and Tobin, but watch Shatto. He was Mantell's partner and he's dangerous as a rattler."

"You got a gun, Lance?" questioned Dell sharply.

"No. They took mine and I've had no chance to pick up another. If I'd had a gun I'd have stayed there and fought it out with them."

"I'll lend you one of mine," said Dell, and started away. "Come on."

"Where are you going?" questioned Verda hurriedly.

"Up to Kegley's place," said Dell. "I believe in going after the other fellow before he starts after me. You go on into the house, douse the light in your father's room and pull the window shades. Maybe Doc has got a gun around the house. If not, send Doc out to look for the marshal.

"Danby is all right. But I'm hoping Kegley and his gang won't get by me. If they discover Lance here is gone I don't look for them to make their play against your dad right now. They know Lance will spill his brains and they'll have to take time to figure out a new play." He paused briefly and added: "Aren't afraid, are you?"

"Not for myself," she said softly.

"Don't worry about your dad, either," he reassured her. "They won't get to him."

She wanted to say more, tell Dell that it was for him she was afraid. But he had turned and was already fading away in the dark with Lance Kegley close behind him.

THEY hit the main street less than a block from Kegley's saloon, and almost immediately came face to face with Marshal Danby. All halted abruptly and Dell said:

"Better get down to Doc Rover's house and stand guard, Danby. There's trouble in the air."

"I've been smelling it," answered Danby. "Remember what I told you about making your own plays, Barton. If you know something you better spill it."

Time was too precious to waste it arguing with the marshal, so briefly Dell recounted what he knew. Danby's jaw set. He accepted Dell's words without question and fell in beside him.

"We'll make this official, Barton," he said. "Let me do the talking."

"A lot of men have killed themselves talking," answered Dell dryly.

"We'll be dealing with snakes, Danby. Don't forget that."

The three of them moved on up the street. Dell didn't know how much support he could depend upon from either man who sided him, yet he was glad enough to have them along. At least their presence cut down the odds.

Kegley, Dutch Gilmore and Link Milner were grouped at the lower end of the bar, their heads close together in lowered conversation. Tony Shatto was tilted back in a lookout chair close to the closed door of Kegley's office. The hour was still early and only a half dozen patrons were in the saloon.

Shatto's eyes were on the front door and he was the first to see Dell, Lance Kegley and Danby enter the saloon. Seeing Lance in the company of Dell and Danby was all the warning he needed. Given a chance, Rufe Kegley would have tried to talk his way out of the tight place as he had much at stake. But not Tony Shatto. The little man was a killer, and in Dell and Lance Kegley he saw two men against whom he was harboring grudges.

He snarled a warning to his friends and rolled sideways out of the chair, snaking his gun. Dell's hand moved at the same time. Their shots almost blended. But Shatto was off balance and Dell had pulled up short and was standing on spread legs. His bullet took Shatto in the stomach and, as the outlaw rocked forward, a second bullet slammed against his head.

After that hell broke loose. Danby had come here to talk and not shoot. He was slow in getting his gun out. The first bullet from Dutch Gilmore's gun whirled him half around and dropped him to one knee. Lance Kegley had entered the saloon with his borrowed gun already in his fist.

His first shot was too anxious, hurried. It creased the right side of Kegley's neck and blood spurted. The hit did nothing to spoil Kegley's aim. He was a gambler and stone cold in the pinches. Lance took one staggering step backward from the impact of his bullet and crumpled. He was dead as he hit the floor.

Danby's gun was now belching lead. Link Milner, who had been diving for cover around the end of the bar, pulled up short and pitched to his hands and knees. Dell kept on the move fading to one side with his shots. Kegley was rolling lead at him, still keeping his feet while his lean, whiplash body absorbed two slugs from Dell's gun.

But the shock of those bullets spoiled his aim. His own shots tugged at Dell's clothes, but none of them bit into flesh. Dell was beginning to think the man was immune to lead when his third shot stopped the angry spat of Kegley's gun. Dutch Gilmore had sagged to a sitting position on the footrail. His gun was still talking.

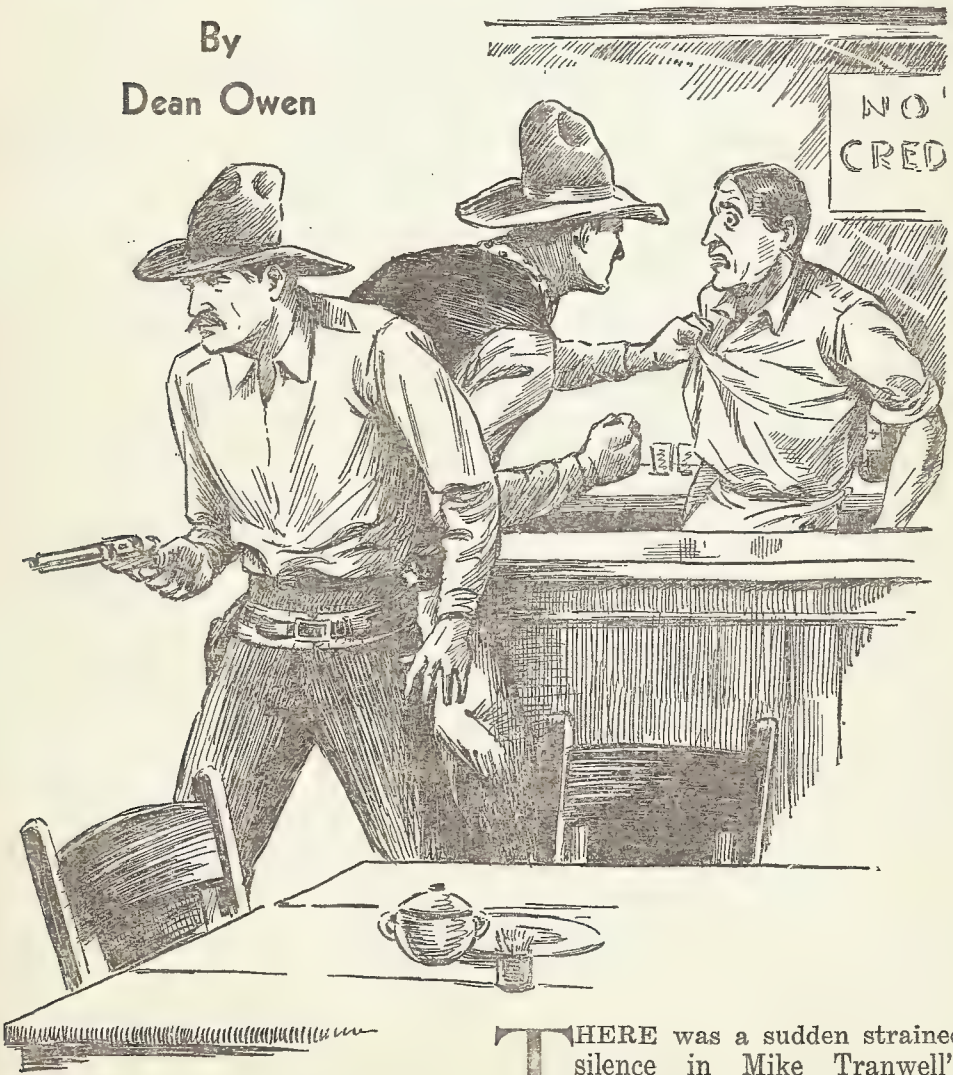
As Dell sent his finishing bullet at Kegley a shot from Gilmore's gun plowed through his thigh. The jolt knocked the leg out from under him and he went down. It was Gilmore's last shot. A well-aimed bullet from Danby's gun caught him in the throat, severing the jugular.

Silence settled over the room. Powdersmoke drifted about in a blue haze. The frightened spectators came to life, went to the aid of Dell and Marshal Danby. Both were taken down to Doc Rover's house for treatment of their wounds. Verda Scanlin had Dell removed to the Scanlin home on the hill. He thrived under her nursing, though he fretted about being bedridden with a game leg when nothing else ailed him.

Still he liked the fuss she made over him. And there came a day when he could stand again on two good legs and tell her what he had long been thinking. A man couldn't ask a girl to marry him when he was flat on his back, not a man like Dell Barton, who was now boss of the Block X, having sold his little spread below the foothills.

Saddle Bum's Bargain

By
Dean Owen



Joe Gale had all the earmarks of a lazy saddle bum. But Joe's brain was fast—and his trigger finger faster—in a killer's showdown.

THERE was a sudden strained silence in Mike Tranwell's Crescent Bar as the words of young Joe Gale rattled against the adobe walls. Eyes of the handful of late-afternoon drinkers, smacked into the freckled face of the puncher who stood at the far end of the bar and laid his holstered six-shooter on the polished top.

"I said Big Ed Haines was the gent I seen leavin' Clem Yance's shack, the night he was kilt," Gale said

again. He crooked a long forefinger at bald-headed Mike Tranwell behind the bar. "How much fer the gun?"

Mike Tranwell wiped his hands on a white apron and glared at the young puncher through narrowed black eyes.

"Any gent who accuses 'Honest' Ed Haines of murder ain't drinkin' in my place!" he snapped.

Joe Gale smelled of cheap whisky, but his eyes were clear, cold as the waters of a mountain lake. He rubbed a flat hand over his rocky jaw and regarded the barkeep for a second. Then he patted the weapon which lay on the bar top. "It's a good gun. Gimme five for the belt an' six-shooter. I need drinkin' money. Mebby if I git enough rotgut under my hide I kin fergit about Clem Yance and fergit about Big Ed Haines murderin' him."

A scowl ridged the barkeep's forehead. He dropped his eyes to the six-gun and picked it up. Tranwell cleared his throat and his black eyes lighted up in speculation.

"Make it four an' she's sold," he grunted. He turned to the handful of men farther down the bar. "I might as well make the profit on the deal. Otherwise he'll jist take it to one o' them Mex cantinas an' peddle it."

None of the men answered, and without waiting for Joe Gale's acceptance of the figure, Tranwell threw four silver dollars on the bar and picked up the belted weapon. Joe Gale let the money lay on the wood top.

"Old Crow," he grumbled. When Tranwell had filled up his glass, Joe turned to the knot of men at the other end of the long bar. "Understand, I ain't accusin' Ed Haines of deliberate murder. I jist seen him leavin' the ol' nester's shack after Yance was kilt."

A blocky man with gray handlebar mustaches which trailed over a big mouth, detached himself from the group of men. There was a polished star on his shirt front that matched the glitter in his faded old eyes. Sheriff Jake Roberts spat in the spittoon and looked at Joe Gale.

"You're drunk," he snapped. "A minute ago you come right out an' said Ed Haines done the killin'. Now you're tryin' to crawl outa it. You was my deputy, Gale. When Ed Haines took to beatin' your time with Rita Harmon, you started on the bottle. I fired you off the job. Now you're accusin' Ed Haines of murder. You better button your lip."

Tranwell wiped the bar with a white towel. "I'll put in with you, sheriff. If Haines hears Joe Gale shootin' off, there'll be gunsmoke. Ed Haines comes in here every day at this time fer a drink. Gale better ride 'er easy."

A grin slanted across Joe Gale's wide mouth. He staggered a little and looked into the mirror behind the bar. The interior of the saloon was gloomy. Joe had seen Big Ed Haines come in and stand near the swinging doors, in the shadows. The other men had been so intent on Gale's words, they hadn't seen the rancher come in.

Joe Gale stood there at the end of the bar. He watched Tranwell, the barkeep, walk toward the drinkers, a perplexed frown on his wide face.

"I don't see why all the fuss about the murder anyhow," the saloon owner said gruffly. "Clem Yance was a nester. Ed Haines sold him two sections. An' a hundred cows. Like as not what Haines said was true. Yance was an owlhooter."

JOE GALE saw that no one was looking at him. In the mirror he could see that Ed Haines was watching Tranwell. Joe picked up the whisky glass and poured the contents into the spittoon at his feet. He rattled the empty glass on the bar top.

"Gimme another one, Tranwell," he said. Joe stole a glance in the mirror. Ed Haines leaned against the wall. Tranwell looked up irritably

battered and worn, and handed it to Gale.

"A drunk cowhand left that fer drinks, he growled. "I'll jist take the three dollars you've left on the bar." He picked up the silver dollars and stuffed them in his pocket.

Gale hefted the gun, tried the trigger action. "Feels like a hunk of stove wood." He stuck it in his belt, then turned to Big Ed.

"You're carryin' a gun you've used for years," he said bitterly. "I'm usin' a strange Colt. Every split second will count when we meet. How about you usin' somebody else's gun Then we'll be on even terms."

A SCOWL ridged Big Ed's forehead. He looked down at his gun, hanging low in the tooled leather holster. "You show oncommon logic fer a feller who's supposed to be liquored up," he said gravely.

Gale laughed in his face. "Mebby liquor puts an edge on my wits. How about it? You goin' to take advantage of me by usin' your own gun?"

Sheriff Jake Roberts cleared his throat and pulled on his gray mustache. "Long as both of you is dead set on shootin' it out, I think mebby Gale speaks right. I'll loan you my Colt, Haines."

The men at the bar watched the sheriff pull the gun from his holster and hand it to Big Ed. The rancher took it and turned the weapon over in his hand, scowling as he did so. Then as if suddenly making up his mind, he pulled out his own gun and shoved the sheriff's in its place. Then he laid his own Colt on the bar.

"I'll be back fer this, Tranwell," he told the saloon owner. "That is, if I'm lucky." He whipped around and glowered down at Joe Gale. "You've accused me of murder. I reckon lead is the only thing that settles this and other things."

"Meanin' Rita?" Joe Gale shot at him. "You're right."

They went over the proceedings of the fight again. Both men would leave the town by different roads. Big Ed Haines would go a quarter of a mile beyond the Starlight Creek Bridge and start back.

"Remember," Tranwell said eagerly. "Twenty feet before you hit the bridge, dismount. Start walkin' an' pull your guns when you feel like it." He rubbed his chin. "Don't nobody foller 'em," he said to the crowd. "Leave 'em alone. I'm settin' up the drinks fer the lucky one of the pair."

Joe Gale got his horse and climbed unsteadily into the saddle. The saloon crowd had come out to watch him leave. Big Ed was already riding out of town, back straight, head held high. Neither the sheriff nor Tranwell showed up.

Joe rode slowly past the Cattleman's Café, run by Rita Harmon. Rita was a hard-faced blonde. She stood in the doorway now, leaning against the wall. Rita was getting a little fat. She didn't say anything and Joe Gale laughed.

"And Big Ed thinks he's beatin' my time with her."

The sun was just about to dive behind the jagged peaks of the Sangrol Mountains when Joe Gale saw the Starlight Creek bridge. He rode a little farther, dismounted and ground-anchored his bronc. Then he started forward on foot. Every nerve was pulled tight. He squinted his black eyes into the thickening shadows. Cottonwoods grew along the far side of the bridge.

Joe hadn't gone fifteen feet when a figure stepped out of the cottonwoods at the other end of the twenty foot wooden structure. It was Big Ed Haines and he held a gun in his fist.

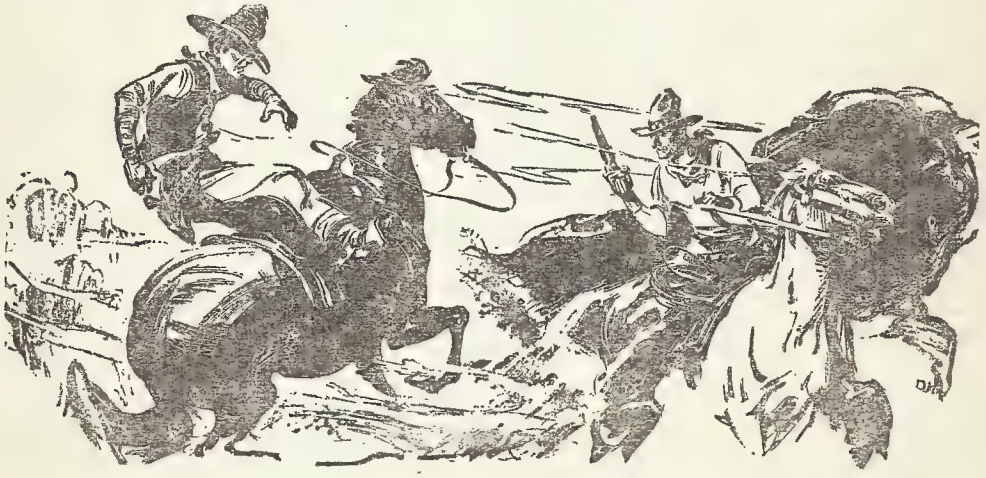
"You brought it on yourself, Gale," he snapped. "Sure I killed Clem Yance. He was blackmailin' me. Took me for two sections of land and a hundred cows. When he wanted five thousand, I got rid of him. I'm wanted in Montana for murder. Yance knew that. Well, Joe, let's hear you say somethin'."

"What I do is my own business," he said. He swung his gaze to Ed Haines. "This place is too small to hold me and Haines. I know somethin' about the murder of Clem Yance I ain't told. When I come back from meetin' Haines, I'll tell you."

Big Ed Haines knocked the ash from his cigar and smiled. He shook his big head.

"I hate to fight you, Joe. But you asked for it. How do you want to do it?"

Tranwell leaned across the bar. A fly buzzed around his bald dome and he swatted at it aimlessly.



"Why don't you ride toward the Starlight Creek Bridge from different directions?" he put in eagerly. "Twenty feet afore you hit the bridge approaches, dismount and start walkin'. Draw your guns any time you want."

"You're encouragin' a shootin'," Sheriff Roberts stormed. "Keep your long nose outa this."

Joe Gale threw back his head and laughed. "I think Tranwell's got the best idea he ever had. Suits me." He straightened and looked at Ed Haines. "How about you?"

There was no visible emotion on Haines' broad face. He nodded. "If that's the way you want it, it's all right with me."

Some of the men at the bar started to argue, but Tranwell held up a fat hand. "Leave 'em be, boys. You know as well as I do that Joe Gale's been makin' fight talk. Let 'em fight it out."

Joe Gale shoved hands deep in the pockets of his black pants. He looked down at his gunless belt and shook his head slowly.

"Gimme back my cutter, Tranwell," he said. "I'll let you have it back when this is over with."

The saloon owner's mouth clamped shut. "I gave you four dollars for the gun. You ain't gittin' it back. Since you've blowed your steam, supposin' you figger out a way to git a hogleg."

Joe's fists clenched and his eyes screwed down hard.

"You got a rep fer bein' close," he snapped. "But I never figgered you'd draw the strings that tight."

"Mebbyso," Tranwell g r o w l e d. "But I don't make talk I cain't back up. You should've figgered shootin' Big Ed was more important than guzzlin' red-eye."

"Your business would shore suffer if everybody felt like that," Joe Gale commented dryly.

There didn't seem to be any answer Tranwell could make to that. He shrugged his shoulders and leaned down and opened a drawer. He pulled out a long, bone-handled six-shooter,

battered and worn, and handed it to Gale.

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A SCOWL ridged Big Ed's forehead. He looked down at his gun, hanging low in the tooled leather holster. "You show oncommon logic fer a feller who's supposed to be liquored up," he said gravely.

Gale laughed in his face. "Mebby liquor puts an edge on my wits. How about it? You goin' to take advantage of me by usin' your own gun?"

Sheriff Jake Roberts cleared his throat and pulled on his gray mustache. "Long as both of you is dead set on shootin' it out, I think mebby Gale speaks right. I'll loan you my Colt, Haines."

The men at the bar watched the sheriff pull the gun from his holster and hand it to Big Ed. The rancher took it and turned the weapon over in his hand, scowling as he did so. Then as if suddenly making up his mind, he pulled out his own gun and shoved the sheriff's in its place. Then he laid his own Colt on the bar.

"I'll be back fer this, Tranwell," he told the saloon owner. "That is, if I'm lucky." He whipped around and glowered down at Joe Gale. "You've accused me of murder. I reckon lead is the only thing that settles this and other things."

"Meanin' Rita?" Joe Gale shot at him. "You're right."

They went over the proceedings of the fight again. Both men would leave the town by different roads. Big Ed Haines would go a quarter of a mile beyond the Starlight Creek Bridge and start back.

"Remember," Tranwell said eagerly. "Twenty feet before you hit the bridge, dismount. Start walkin' an' pull your guns when you feel like it." He rubbed his chin. "Don't nobody foller 'em," he said to the crowd. "Leave 'em alone. I'm settin' up the drinks fer the lucky one of the pair."

Joe Gale got his horse and climbed unsteadily into the saddle. The saloon crowd had come out to watch him leave. Big Ed was already riding out of town, back straight, head held high. Neither the sheriff nor Tranwell showed up.

Joe rode slowly past the Cattleman's Café, run by Rita Harmon. Rita was a hard-faced blonde. She stood in the doorway now, leaning against the wall. Rita was getting a little fat. She didn't say anything and Joe Gale laughed.

"And Big Ed thinks he's beatin' my time with her."

The sun was just about to dive behind the jagged peaks of the Sangrol Mountains when Joe Gale saw the Starlight Creek bridge. He rode a little farther, dismounted and ground-anchored his bronc. Then he started forward on foot. Every nerve was pulled tight. He squinted his black eyes into the thickening shadows. Cottonwoods grew along the far side of the bridge.

Joe hadn't gone fifteen feet when a figure stepped out of the cottonwoods at the other end of the twenty foot wooden structure. It was Big Ed Haines and he held a gun in his fist.

"You brought it on yourself, Gale," he snapped. "Sure I killed Clem Yance. He was blackmailin' me. Took me for two sections of land and a hundred cows. When he wanted five thousand, I got rid of him. I'm wanted in Montana for murder. Yance knew that. Well, Joe, let's hear you say somethin'."

But Joe Gale was having no chance to answer. Big Ed was firing. Three shots blasted the stillness. Joe's body seemed to jerk. He pitched sideways, then plunged off the bridge. His body made a splash as it hit the shallow water.

At that instant, Sheriff Jake Roberts hopped up from under the bridge and lined a gun on Big Ed's middle. The sheriff's gray mustache twitched in the breeze.

"I heard you confess that you kilt Clem Yance," he ripped out.

Big Ed just stood there, a slow grin hitting his lips. He looked at the gun in his hand, then back at the sheriff.

"You cain't prove nothin'," he laughed. "You ain't got a witness."

"Yes, he's got a witness all right." Joe Gale climbed out of the tules which grew alongside the bridge, his clothes clinging mud. He climbed up on the wood bridge. "We tricked you, Ed. That gun was loaded with blanks. We chewed paper and plugged the end of them shells. After rubbin' the paper with ashes they looked enough like bullets to pass." Joe held his gun in his hand.

For a second Big Ed Haines stood rooted on the bridge. Then his fist spun into his coat pocket. A bulldog pistol blasted. Joe Gale sat down hard as crimson poured through a hole in his shirt. The old gun in his hand barked and Big Ed crumpled.

"I didn't think your trick would work," the sheriff said soberly. "I reckon Big Ed's dead."

Tranwell came up just then, riding a bony gray. The saloon owner's bald head glistened with sweat.

"Joe, you got a head on your shoulders," he chuckled. "We sure played her sweet."

But Joe Gale only grunted as the sheriff bound up his bullet-pierced arm. "How about chargin' that whisky I poured all over myself to the expense account?"

Tranwell shook his head. "It was on the house, boys."

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Renegades on the

Fighting prairie pirates was nothing new for Scout Tom Chilton. But never before had he run a gun gauntlet between buckskin bullets and a crimson cavalcade.

CHAPTER I

Prairie Pirate

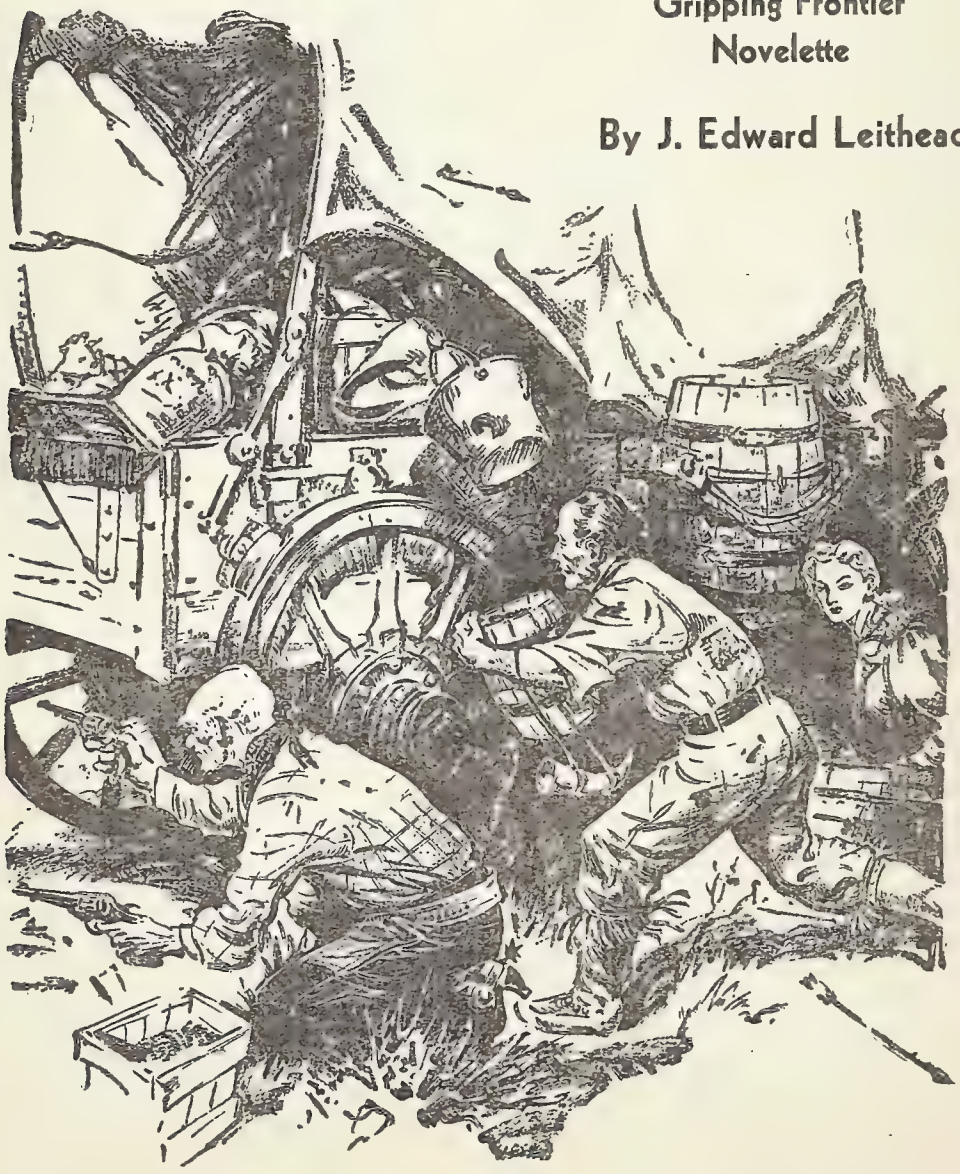
THEY were a strangely associated pair in the abandoned lean-to along the upper Missouri. A blue-clad cavalryman, with a captain's shoulder straps, and a man in greasy buckskins, whiskered almost to his wolfish eyes.

"It's a risky deal, cap," said Shag Poe, who lived among the Teton Sioux. "But I've got pull with Al-

Powderhorn

Gripping Frontier Novelette

By J. Edward Leithead



ways Ridin', havin' saved his life in a blizzard one time. You're payin' in gold, o' course?"

"Gold," nodded Captain Cal Jessup, in charge of scouts at Fort Hazard, Montana. He shifted restively on the edge of the tottery table that the pack rats had gnawed. "But I haven't it with me today. Wanted to be sure we could work together."

The renegade Poe hooked stubby pipe from yellowed teeth, spat on the

cabin floor. "Reckon we can. I'll do all I can to git Always Ridin' and his head men lined up for a peace smoke at Monument Rock—say in three-four days."

"You'll have to let me know exactly when," Captain Jessup said. "I must have time to select certain of my scouts for this job—Indian haters who won't talk afterward—and prepare the ambush. But don't come near the fort, Poe. I'll drop by here in a day or two, at the same hour. It's a safe meeting place."

"Go hard with you—" Shag Poe bared his fangs in a grin—"if the colonel suspected, huh?"

"It would. Everything's got to look all right when we pack the dead chiefs to the post. I will claim, of course, that the scouts and I picked them off in an open brush with the hostiles."

Ruthlessly ambitious to rise in the Army of the Frontier, Captain Jessup was planning a coup with Poe's aid which could hardly fail to win him promotion, if the truth were carefully suppressed. Gold had been discovered in Misery Gulch, west of Fort Hazard, bringing hordes of gold hunters by steamboat up the Missouri and overland by wagon train.

The Sioux and other tribes were aroused, but thus far had made only scattered forays. The treaty with Red Cloud, some years previous, when the government abandoned the building of a wagon road, was being scrapped.

Jessup had conceived his plan for personal advancement when the post commander had remarked that, if the Indians were deprived of their leaders, especially Always Riding, the spirit of resistance to the gold seekers would be weakened and the army's job of keeping the redmen in hand made lighter. But Colonel Henry Tutt was not the man to stoop to ambush or trickery to achieve that end.

Unknown to either schemer in the lean-to, there was a listener without. Red Hand, young Teton sub-chief, had accidentally witnessed a previous meeting of the "horse soldier" and Shag Poe, causing his distrust of the latter. Saying nothing to his tribesmen, Red Hand had kept watch of Poe's movements from that day. The Indian had followed him when he left the Teton village for his second rendezvous with Captain Jessup.

Crouched in the underbrush, within earshot of the voices beyond a broken window, Red Hand's grip tightened on his rifle as the plot was unfolded. He knew enough English to comprehend the treachery these white men intended, and in his mind's eye saw two scalps dangling from his lace-head. The far-off rataplan of hoofs diverted his attention, and he heard the sagging shack door creak as Jessup and Poe were attracted by the same sound. Warily Red Hand shifted ground toward the front of the lean-to.

SOLDIER and renegade, standing just outside, watched the rider heading up from the south with mutual feelings of uneasiness. He was a white man, buckskin-clad, but his features were indistinct. Jessup unslung his field glasses and focused them. He swore in amazement as the horseman leaped close through the magic of the lens.

"Tom Chilton! The last man I'd want to be seen by in your company, Poe!"

"Chilton—who's he? Let's have a look, cap." Poe stabbed a hairy-backed hand for the binoculars.

"No time." The captain cased the instrument. "Inside, before he's near enough to recognize me!"

He whirled toward the lean-to door, stiffened at sight of a copper-skinned figure rising from a thicket of weeds, rifle leveled. The muzzle jetted flame, and the captain, with choking cry, fell loosely. Shag Poe's gaze betrayed both surprise and fear as it fastened on the aquiline features framed by

thick braids, the headband supporting a single eagle feather.

"Red Hand!" he belched, and was galvanized to action as the young Sioux, with no time to recharge his breechloader, snatched tomahawk from beaded belt.

Poe unslung his Colt .44, fired before the hatchet spun at him. His bullet raked the sub-chief's swinging arm, and as the bright blade flew wide, Shag darted for the shack door, slammed through. Death was at his heels, he thought. But a long-range shot had suddenly shifted Red Hand's attention from the renegade to the onsweeping buckskin rider.

A second rifle bullet followed the first so quickly that the young Sioux knew the horseman was armed with one of those repeating weapons new to the plains, and he had only a Springfield single-shot breechloader. While Red Hand hesitated, a third slug cut the dirt close by his left moccasin.

Tom Chilton, scout and plainsman, was pounding out the last ten miles of the long danger trail from Fort Laramie, Wyoming Territory, to Fort Hazard, far up the muddy Missouri, when he caught sight of the white men in front of the lean-to. He carried important despatches to Colonel Henry Tutt. No better man than Chilton could have been sent on that journey into the Montana wilds.

In uncut ringlets his black hair massed about shoulders which could heave a government wagon out of a mud-hole; framed a dark-tanned face lighted by eagle piercing gray eyes. His headgear a flat-crowned plains hat, for the rest Tom wore buckskin tunic and breeches, and Sioux style moccasins, with long-shanked spurs at heel.

"That yellow-leg," Tom had thought as he eyed the man with the field glasses, "looks a lot familiar—Powder River!"

The exclamation was drawn from him by the sudden uprising of Red Hand, the crumpling of the fellow in army blue. Tom Chilton spurred his tired horse and reached for rifle in saddle boot, one of the new-fangled Henry twelve-shot repeaters which had come into use during the late Civil War. To aid the remaining white man, Tom opened fire. Kept on firing and getting the range better as he hammered in.

Red Hand swiftly calculated his fighting chances, found that they tallied slim. Two white men against him, one behind the shack wall, the other with a faster shooting gun than his own. He must even leave behind the scalp of the treacherous horse soldier. With a disappointed yell, the Indian dived into the nearby thicket, reappeared on a spotted pony. As he thudded away, still yelling and shaking his breechloader, Tom Chilton lowered the Henry and galloped up to the lean-to.

THE scout checked rein beside the prostrate form of the soldier, slipped earthward with feline grace to turn it over. One look at the face of Captain Jessup and he expelled a sharp breath. "It's him, all right! Now, where's the feller in buckskin, to explain this?"

Chilton strode to the leaning door and peered inside. The shack was empty. But he marked the window through which Shag Poe had made exit just after Red Hand scudded for the tall timber. The renegade had no desire to be questioned by this Chilton, of whom Jessup had said little, yet sufficient to put Shag on his guard. Poe's line of flight was not toward the Teton village. There wasn't a doubt that Red Hand knew he had been ready to sell out the tribe, and the Sioux would dance Shag's scalp if he showed up among them now.

Trying to riddle out the reason for the unknown buckskin man's quick getaway, Tom Chilton skirted the lean-to in search of the captain's horse. He found it in the scrub timber beyond, also the barefoot tracks of Poe's Indian pony. Anxious to

reach Fort Hazard, the scout wasted no time over this profitless "sign," but led the cavalry horse back to where Jessup lay.

At Fort Laramie, Tom had served in the captain's corps of scouts, and because of his independent spirit and superiority in plainscraft, they had never got along. In fact, they were avowedly hostile to each other. But Chilton couldn't bring himself to leave Jessup's body for wolf bait.

He was about to lift the slain officer and tie him in the saddle, when rapidly nearing hoofbeats pulled him erect, to gaze northward. His acute ear told the plainsman that cavalry mounts, not barefoot Indian horses, were making that heavy clatter. A file of forage caps topped a rise, and as the troopers quickened their pace downslope, Tom counted twenty in the detachment.

"Thunder, it's Scout Chilton!" rasped the foremost horseman, whose coat sleeves bore the yellow chevrons of a cavalry sergeant, with a yellow stripe along each trouser leg.

"Howdy, sarge," responded the scout. He wasn't reassured to have Martin Murgatroyd discover him with Captain Jessup's remains. For the top sergeant of B Troop, Sixth Cavalry, had been as thick with the captain as the difference in their rank would allow.

Murgatroyd crackled, "Halt! At ease!" and left the saddle, clanking forward to stare at the upturned face of Jessup. Tom stood silent while the cavalryman knelt for closer examination of the death wound. Murgatroyd glanced up finally, his sun-and-whisky reddened features a mask of fury ready to let loose.

"We've been lookin' for the cap'n since officers' call this mornin', Chilton. He had leave to stay over in Roarin' Bend till midnight, and the colonel thought he might've wandered onto the plains and got lit on by some hostiles. But—" the sergeant jerked to his feet and bellowed the words—"the Injun that killed him had a white skin! What brought you up here, Chilton—despatch ridin'?"

"Yes," said Tom, keeping his anger in check. "But as for me pouchin' lead in Cal Jessup, it ain't so! Listen to what did happen. You'll find the pony tracks of the Injun killer and the buckskin man who was with Jessup, to bear me out."

BUT Sergeant Murgatroyd's flinty gaze and grim mouth expressed incredulity when Chilton had related the facts as he knew them. The trooper barked:

"Pony tracks don't cut any figure, because the trails are lousy with Injun scouts. You hated Cap'n Jessup, and catchin' him alone, you done for him! His pistol's not been out of the holster. Man, you'll swing for this! Hand over your shootin'-irons!"

Tom's face blazed at the order. "Not to you, sarge! I'll ride back with you, but I keep my guns."

Sergeant Murgatroyd squared on the alert blue column and rapped: "'Tention! First squad, dismount and disarm this killer! He's under arrest."

Eight troopers hit the dirt, clutching carbines. The sergeant was betting that Chilton would turn his head for a halved second. Tom did so; but from the corner of his eye he detected the jerking of Murgatroyd's right arm. The scout's hands blurred in hipward, streaking to gunstocks, and he rocked the hammer of one .44 as it tilted out of leather. The sergeant collapsed with Navy revolver unfired, and Chilton faced the leaping troopers, his voice ringing.

"Hold it, boys! I don't aim to kill unless I'm put on!"

A carbine spat a bullet which grazed his cheek. Chilton answered with flaming Colt. The soldier's bent right elbow flapped down and the carbine slipped from his shoulder. Tom lost view of the pain-distorted brown face as other faces bobbed in between.

His guns talked on, ripping blue

tunics and the flesh beneath. He felt the hot slash of lead along his ribs and the muscle-grooving course of another bullet athwart his thigh. Two or three troopers sprang around behind him. There were too many for one man to keep track of and handle carefully. Pitted against hostile redmen, or white men of different caliber, the scout would have shot center.

A corporal darted in flankward before Tom could swivel his .44's and slammed carbine butt on the flat hatcrown. Chilton went to his knees, his gun barrels sagging, and the trooper swung again. The frontiersman slid on his face.

The corporal pulled a sleeve across dripping forehead. "Begorry, he scraps like ten men, but that'll hold him a bit! Grab his hardware and lash his hands. Double quick, now!"

Men swarmed on the inert scout, those who had remained mounted at the sergeant's order, quitting saddles to assist. The corporal was bending over Murgatroyd.

"Sarge is only creased," he announced. "Fetch up his horse. Chilton didn't aim to kill him or, by Godfrey, he'd be as cold as Cap'n Jessup!"

Tom Chilton hadn't a notion of his surroundings, until the detachment passed the sentry at the stockade gate of Fort Hazard and jogged on to stop before Colonel Tutt's headquarters, in the center of the quadrangle, opposite officers' row. The scout gazed blearily about as rough hands loosened the rope at his ankles and tugged him groundward.

CHAPTER II

Buckskin Strategy

NOT long after the arrival of Sergeant Murgatroyd's party, a horseman in buckskin clattered through the wide gateway, paying scant heed to the bluecoat walking past. Caleb Tolliver acknowledged no man his superior in plainscraft except Tom Chilton, and his liking for the military was not a strong point.

They couldn't fight Injuns the Injun way, as the plainsmen did, and sure needed the buckskin men to get by, to hear Tolliver tell it. He had been good and sore when he was shipped to Montana with Tutt's command, thus separating him from his pard, Chilton.

Instead of Caleb, most of those who knew him called him "Wolftail," for the reason that he wore a somewhat frowsy wolfskin cap, with the bushy tail hanging down behind. The rich red of his long hair matched the magenta hue to which sun and storm had scoured every inch of exposed skin. Add mustaches that spread to the jawline, eyes of blue flame in a broad face with high-bridged nose, and Wolftail wasn't the handsomest man on the plains. But he toted a deadly rifle in the taming of the frontier.

Riding down the parade ground to the turn-off for the stables and quartermaster's corral, the scout spied the mounts of the detachment switching flies in front of headquarters. Wolftail had been checking the lodges and movements of the tribes out yonder for three days, and had a report to make. But he was bent on putting it off until he noticed a rangy black among the troop horses.

"Tom Chilton's hoss, by the great horn spoon!" he exclaimed, kicking his roan toward the colonel's door. "And have I got eyesore for want of a look at Tom!"

He dropped the open reins and hit the veranda steps, slapping some of the dust from his buckskins with the bush-tailed cap. There was an ear-reaching grin on his face. The fiery blue eyes were kindling with the fuel of delight. But some of the joy melted out of his expression as his moccasins padded into the assembly room.

It was crowded with bluecoats, a

couple of them looking pale around the gills, one nursing an elbow, his arm out of the sleeve. More than sick appeared Martin Murgatroyd, upheld by two privates before the colonel's desk, and someone lay blanket-covered on the floor, cavalry boots protruding. But the man who caught and held his gaze was Tom Chilton, with battered plains hat and hands tied. Tied!

Colonel Tutt was speaking in that harsh, staccato way of his which always fretted Wolftail.

"You may as well own up to the murder, Chilton. The circumstances have you trapped. You had trouble with Captain Jessup at Laramie, more than once, and several shots have been fired from this Henry rifle. Jessup was killed by a rifle bullet. Catching him alone on the trail, no doubt you thought his death would be laid to Indians. Why, man, the very fact you resisted arrest indicates a guilty mind!"

The colonel was of medium height and spare. A born fighter with other good qualities too often submerged in a natural arrogance which military training had intensified.

Tom Chilton had known what to expect. "I've told you the facts and nothin' but, colonel. Who the buckskin man with Jessup was, or why he ran away, is somethin' I can't answer. As for the Injun I shot at, and who shot the captain—"

Wolftail Tolliver shouldered to the front. He glanced sidelong at Tom, whose face lost its hardness to ripple with a pleased smile.

"Howdy, Tom! Tight rubbin', eh?"

"Enough to take the skin off, Wolftail. But I got some to spare."

COLONEL TUTT bored the intruder with that steely glance which had made men tremble. He might as well have tried it on a prairie dog for all the effect it had on the red-haired plainsman.

"So you're back, Tolliver? Your report can wait until we've settled this business!"

"Dunno's it can," retorted Wolftail coolly. "My brother scout seems to be in a jackpot and I know he wouldn't lie to get out of it. Any Injun that turned Cap Jessup into buzzard meat done all of us a favor. Jessup was boss o' the scouts, but I didn't trust him. I'd as lief worked with a sidewinder."

"Tolliver," r o a r e d the colonel, "you're insubordinate! Captain Jessup was a good officer, a gentleman—"

"Then so's an army mule!" snorted Wolftail.

Colonel Tutt ignored him for the moment, poked sharp chin at Tom. "You're on your way to the guardhouse, sir, and I'll set an early date for your court-martial. As soon, in fact, as I've read those despatches you brought from Laramie."

The commander nodded and troopers gripped the scout's arms to lead him from the assembly room. For an instant the mighty muscles of Chilton swelled, as he prepared to fling them off. But he knew he couldn't win, with that roomful to pounce on him, and he caught a wink from the red-haired border man which calmed him. He turned to go.

Tolliver faced out the colonel long enough to rap: "You'd better save men like Tom Chilton, 'cause you're goin' to need 'em mighty bad. The Sioux and other tribes ain't war dancin' yet, though young braves are sneakin' away to lift hair wherever they can. It'll take only a leetle spark to fire the powder barrel and spatter gore along the upper Missouri. That's my report, and now I'm quittin' your dang army!"

He felt Colonel Tutt with lower jaw sagging, the soldiers still present nudging one another and grinning slyly.

Wolftail remounted his tired horse, watched the troopers leading Tom Chilton toward the guardhouse and suddenly dug a moccasined heel in his

roan's ribs. He turned up in the sod-walled wagon yard in Roaring Bend, ten minutes' ride from the army post, just as the freighters camped there were kindling the evening cookfire. The mule teamsters were busy these days, freighting cargo brought up-river by the stern-wheelers to the new boom camp at Misery Gulch.

Luckily the freighter sought by the scout wasn't on the trail, a bewhiskered, yellow-toothed frontier product named Jim Wingo. Jim had an "eight-up" of Missouri mules and a high-wheeled Murphy freighter of which Wolftail had urgent need that night. But it took some argument to persuade Wingo. He rolled his quid and made quite a pool of tobacco juice alongside his cowhide boots before he nodded.

"Chilton's a good man, and I reckon I can risk the army jumpin' on me afterward. Me and you has snored under the same blanket, too, Caleb. Anything for a pard. But where you goin' to hide when you break him loose?"

"Down the ol' Missouri, Jim," replied Wolftail with a wise wag of the head. "The *Star o' Empire,* I learnt on the way over, is shovin' off for her return trip at daybreak. Them yellow-legs'll never think o' lookin' there till the whistle whoops."

Roaring Bend, so called because in flood time the river roared past the bend where the frontier town was located, lived up to its name far into the night. Partly the excitement was due to the gold-hungry mob unloaded that day from the steamer, *Star of Empire,* and part of it staged by Tom Chilton and friends.

When Jim Wingo's eight-mule team rattled up to the stockade at Fort Hazard, the sentry let it enter because he had no orders to the contrary, and what the skinner said sounded all right. The quartermaster might be expecting a shipment of clothing and ammunition off the *Star of Empire,* for all that the sentry knew. These freighters often did hauling for the army.

"I'd 'a' pulled in sooner." Wingo called down, kicking the brake loose. "But the cargo deck o' the steamer ain't all unloaded yet, and the quartermaster's stuff got mixed in with goods due to roll for Misery Gulch."

THE sentry resumed his pacing and the big freighter didn't stop again until it was down behind the guardhouse. The corporal of the guard popped out at the front and around to learn what the wagon was doing there.

"If you're huntin' the quartermaster, you won't find him in here," the soldier said good-humoredly and without suspicion.

Wingo had swung from the high seat and was stooping over a hind wheel with a lighted sulphur match.

"I know where I'm goin', trooper!" gruffed the freighter. "Dropped a linchpin and aim to find it before the wheel comes off. Use your eyes here a minute."

The corporal responded briskly, unaware that a buckskin-clad form had slipped over the side board to the ground, at the far side. Wolftail unslung his Colt, walked with no more sound than a moving shadow around the wagon. The mule-skinner and the corporal were on their knees, Wingo striking matches and passing the flame slowly over the ground. Wolftail leaned across his friend's bent back, gun upraised, and tapped the corporal behind the ear. He flattened without a kick.

Wingo was up and darting to the rear of the freight wagon as Tolliver pulled the senseless trooper into the shrubbery. Wagon chains rattled, but only one man in the guardhouse understood the true significance of that sound. As the corporal was around back with the freighter, none of the other guardsmen troubled to investigate. There was but the one prisoner, Tom Chilton. His face was pressed to the square, barred win-

dow, high up in the rear wall. With his own hands he helped to lock the chains around those bars, and then stood back in the gloom, ready to leap for liberty. His fists were blocked, his nostrils flared. Wolftail had a head on him, thinking up this method of guardhouse delivery, but the hardest part would be getting away.

Jim Wingo climbed swiftly to his high perch, grabbed the lines and his blacksnake whip. He had been careful to keep his hat brim bent across bearded face and to avoid illuminating it. The unnatural gruffness of his voice would never give him away to that corporal if they met again. Jim's whip exploded and the climax came with a rush.

Straining into collars the eight-up quickly hauled up the slack in the chains extending from end-gate to window bars. The splintering crack of parting timbers rose to a mighty crash as half the wall fell outward. Through the breach surged a figure in buckskins, to be joined by another outside. Both stopped in mad haste to unsling the chains and carry them as they galloped for the rear of the rolling wagon.

"In with you!" husked Tolliver, and Chilton's lithe body flung across the lowered tail-gate.

Tom turned, on his knees, grasped two fistfuls of buckskin and lifted the thudding Wolftail in beside him. Wingo stuck to his driving. Already the mules had hauled out from behind the guardhouse, were flying flat-bellied along the parade. Carbines flashed as the guards, stunned to momentary inaction by the wrenching away of the back wall, tumbled outside and spotted their lead on the tail-gate. It was chained up now, and nothing was visible of the two jubilant frontiersmen hunkered in the wagon bed.

"Bet the guard detail reckoned 'twas crack o' doom!" chuckled Tom. "Good thing these wagons were built to turn Injun bullets. We ain't to the gate yet."

"Leave it to the mules and Jim Wingo!" Wolftail said cheerfully. "I hadn't time to tell you, but we're takin' a steamboat ride. *Star o' Empire* weighs anchor at dawn. Sure I quit the army! Reckon I'd stay in it when they'd hang a man like you, just for nothin' at all?"

The sentry at the gate came within an ace of plowing Wingo from his seat. But he hadn't time for a second try before the mules were thundering down and he was obliged to jump back. The fort was agog as the rumbling outfit cleared the stockade, fleeing across the level and into town. Wingo let up with his blacksnake, for his eight mules were running away.

The freighter chose a side road to reach the wagon yard, and brother teamsters sprang to head the lead mules. There were many hands to help unhitch, roll the wagon in between two others and turn the mules into the stock corral, so that when the troops arrived there'd be nothing to prove which Murphy freighter had been out of the yard. The wagon bodies were all more or less scarred by bullet and arrow from hauls through Indians country, and not a man among the skinners would talk.

Chilton and Tolliver dared not linger to help remove the evidence. They pressed Jim's hand and were gone racing through dark alleyways toward the landing where the *Star of Empire* was tied up.

CHAPTER III

Red Raiders

AN IRATE lieutenant and ten troopers combed the wagon yard and every possible hideaway in Roaring Bend before the officer decided that the two scouts had fled to the plains, and so reported to Colonel Tutt. Hence, when the *Star of Empire* hurled a farewell blast to the skies as day was breaking, none at the fort heeded.

The huge stern-wheel revolved,

and out into midstream backed the boat and nosed downriver. The lights in the captain's cabin turned pale, and three men who had sat for hours around the table, pushed back their chairs, yawned and relaxed taut muscles.

"Good-by to Tutt's outfit," Tom Chilton said with a relieved smile. "I was to join Jessup's scout corps, Wolftail. Did I tell you?"

"No," replied Tolliver, knocking the dottle from his pipe. "And that reminds me, Tom, I got one of the boys to sneak your Henry repeater, your Colts and saddle on board. Our horses I arranged for Jim Wingo to care for, though I dunno as we'll see 'em again."

"We will, but no sayin' how soon," Tom prophesied. "I don't aim to have that murder charge hangin' over me the rest of my days. Meantime, what're we goin' to work at?"

Old Captain Parvin, with whom Wolftail had become friendly when the *Star of Empire* transported Tutt's regiment up the Yellowstone and the Missouri to Fort Hazard, tipped visored cap to the back of his snow-white head. Parvin had spent more than half his life along Western waterways, and at sixty was an amiable sort of pirate, ever ready to give the underdog a hand. Clutching stubby black pipe in tight teeth, he spoke.

"You two ain't river men or I'd give you jobs. But here's an idee for whatever it's worth. Sunstone, two days and a half downriver, is a port o' call. That's the town where the wagons goin' overland to Misery Gulch get outfitted. The trains need guides. You could hire out easy and make you some money."

Both scouts were looking at Cap Parvin with widening eyes and grins. It was an idea!

"The wagon trails don't run nowhere near Fort Hazard and Roarin' Bend," the steamboat captain added, well pleased that his suggestion was favorably received. "You boys wouldn't likely meet the soldiers."

"That's what we'll do, cap, so let us off at Sunstone!" declared Chilton. "Eh, Wolftail?"

They found the frontier town brawling with lusty life when the boat docked there late one afternoon. It was scarcely dark before Chilton and Tolliver were engaged to pilot thirty prairie schooners to the Misery Gulch diggings. By next sunup the wagon wheels were turning.

SEVERAL days of that three weeks' trek went by without incident. The buckskin men held a mile or two lead of the wagons from dawn till dark, and each evening returned to the cheerful blaze of cook-fires. No Indian sign as yet, though Wolftail didn't trust the lack of it. He had dodged many scalping parts of young Sioux and Cheyennes when he made his plains survey for the Sixth.

"Smoke yonder!" said Tom abruptly, as they were riding trail far ahead of the plodding oxen on the fifth morning out.

"I see!" nodded Wolftail, squinting at the haze-dimmed hogback in the northwest, the rocky fore-slope concealing the source of the fire. "Not prairie grass, not camp smoke or Injun signal. What's your guess, Tom?"

"Settlers' cabins or burnin' wagons," Chilton promptly answered. "We're upwind and not a sound comin' down, so I reckon the reds have done their worst and gone on."

The horses bought at Sunstone were headed for the smoky ridge. From its crest the tale of disaster was unrolled before their searching eyes. A wagon train, smaller than their own, had obviously been caught unforted by red raiders. The smoke clouds billowed from gutted Conestogas, strung out in a defenseless line. Butchered humans and oxen and horses lay where little groups had made a last brave stand in the open.

Tight-lipped, the scouts rode down. Scenes of massacre were not new to them, but neither had become cal-

lous to the tragedies of the trail. As they guided mounts through the litter and wreckage, Tom stretched fringed arm to jerk a feathered shaft from a charred wagon-body. He passed it to Wolftail, uttering: "Sioux notchin'—Teton Sioux."

"Yeh," said Wolftail, fingering the arrow. "Don't believe Always Ridin' has broke loose yet, howsumever. Devil's work of the youngsters I was tellin' you about—what's that?" He craned his neck at a faint cry.

They located the sound as coming from the next wagon, which had been overturned. Although torched by the raiders, for some reason only the canvas sheet and bows had burned. Otherwise, the oldster lying blood-smeared beneath the wagon, his chest crushed, would have been cremated alive. Out of saddles on the jump, Wolftail drew the helpless figure clear when Tom's sturdy shoulder braced up the wagon-box for a moment. At a glance they saw there was no hope for the man. But whisky from Tom's flask brought gasping, blood-choked speech.

"White men—too late—my daughter."

"She ain't hereabouts, pardner," Wolftail said with a keen look around.

"Injuns—took her!" Light of life was fading swiftly from pain-filled eyes. "You get—"

"We'll try to get her," Tom soothed, and he was sure the old eyes closed the more peacefully for that assurance.

"But we can't go trailin' off to snatch one female from the young varmints," Wolftail objected as they stood above the lifeless form. "Not with dozens o' women and children in our train, to be guarded against this sort of bloody work."

"I know," Tom answered sadly. "I said it to ease him out. But we'll keep watch for a white captive if the same Injuns jump us. Hit leather. We'll scout a bit farther, see which way they went."

THE pony tracks led away northward, leaving the wagon road two miles above. Apparently the young Tetons were not aware that a second train was on the way up, and hadn't stopped to prepare another ambush. It would not be so easy to take as the first caravan, with Chilton and his pard breaking trail. The scouts agreed that some greenhorn had been piloting the other train, or else the Sioux were upon it before trail sign warned the wagoneers of hostiles in the neighborhood.

Back the plainsmen galloped from their scouting, and steered the wagons wide of the massacre ground, not wishing to alarm those in their charge more than necessary. After that, one scout or the other kept closer to the caravan than heretofore, ready to catch the enemy signal of his mate in the advance and swing the wagons into defensive circle. By night, as always since the start from Sunstone, the Conestogas presented a strong barrier to Indian assault at dawn.

Two more days of peaceful plodding; then the red lightning struck. An antelope herd had yielded fresh meat, and the train halted earlier than usual that afternoon while the butchering went on under Wolftail's direction. Tom and three of the gold hunters who had slight Indian-fighting experiences, kept watch at the four compass points, on high ground.

The wagons were loosely corraled, although not an Indian had shown himself, either near or far off. The day ended without alarms, and antelope steaks were the chief item of the evening meal, a welcome change from salt meat to the people of the train.

Tom and Wolftail spelled each other on night guard, not trusting the green hands to watch by themselves. In the darkest hour preceding dawn, Chilton was making tireless round of the sentries posted just beyond the wagons, his Henry rifle in bend of arm. Coming to the northeast side

of the wagon circle, he noticed slinking wolfish forms around the antelope offal, two hundred yards distant. He studied the pack a moment, turned to a husky youth in homespun, leaning on an old Springfield muzzle-loader.

"How long they been there?" the scout asked, with a jerk of the head.

"Not long," retorted the drowsy guard. "I'd like to toss a shot at 'em, but it'd wake the train for no good."

"Think not?" said Tom. "There's more of the—the graybacks, slippin' out of that gully mouth. Ain't makin' much noise, any of 'em, are they? Well, bub, wolves are scrappy critters when there's meat around. That pack ain't actin' natural, and you can see they're movin' thisaway by easy stages if you look steady. Watch this!"

He raised the Henry and cut loose. The whang of the rifle was echoed by an Indian howl. The warrior leaped from a crouch, his wolfskin drapery sliding to the ground. Tom fired again and again, and each shot tallied a wolflike figure, exposing it as a creeping redskin. The gun blasts and the yells were quite enough to arouse the train. As Tom retreated inside the wagons with the astonished guard, men were snatching up firearms and taking defensive positions.

As their wolf trick no longer availed them, the raiders sprang forward undisguised, preceded by bullet and arrow. They came afoot, massing against the northeast side of the train, at least two hundred strong. Fire lashed out from under wagon bodies, and the narrow apertures between the Conestogas, standing end to end, gushed flame-split smoke.

TOM fought silently, letting his twelve-shot repeater speak for him. But Wolftail could no more restrain his yelling than one of those charging redmen. It didn't interfere with his shooting. Not a slug that belched from his breechloader was tossed to the wind. The scalp-eager warriors wilted beneath that lead-storm, and those who were able raced out of bullet reach.

"First try, and kinda discouragin' to 'em," Tom commented grimly, finding Wolftail at his elbow in the hull. "But they'll fly at it again, mounted. The war ponies must be hid in that big gully. Let's check what it cost us."

The fighting had all been on one side of the wagon barricade. As the scouts glided from group to group, they were pleased to find no deaths had resulted, only a minor wound being reported here and there. Tom warned the gold seekers that the next attack would be on horseback, that every side of the wagon fort must be manned. Reloading weapons, the men on the train moved to stretch out the fighting line.

"It's young bucks—Cheyennes," Wolftail remarked to Tom as the dawn-light more clearly revealed the features and trappings of slain warriors beyond the Conestogas. "So the head men ain't yet decided on war. If they had, there'd be a thousand yellin' for our hair out yonder."

"Cheyennes," repeated Tom, gazing over his pard's fringed shoulder. "Which means there's no use lookin' for that girl captive among 'em. Get set, Wolftail!"

He poked out his Henry rifle as mounted braves swept over the rim of the prairie, their lance-heads dripping sunlight. The earth trembled to roaring hoofs, the buffalo grass smoked until the film of dust made difficult the targeting of coppery riders. They did not charge head-on, but wheeled into an endless, screeching circle, pounding round and round. The ponies bore the brunt of steady rifle-fire from the train. For most of the warriors had vacated saddle pads, to hang by toe and hand hold, and shoot under the necks of their mounts.

Once a pony was down, his spilled

rider had strong medicine if he could dodge through gunsmoke and dust to safety. Many did not. Tom and his partner set themselves to the business of dropping ponies, then targeting on dismounted Cheyennes trying to escape, either by crawling or a quick dash. The scouts didn't glory in the slaughter; it was stern necessity.

The young hair hunters lost their enthusiasm for the ring-around as casualties increased. They decided the scalps in that train were too costly to reap, and fled as suddenly as they had ridden to the assault. Nor did they return for the balance of the day. Chilton crept out at night to find them nowhere in the vicinity. He felt safe in ordering the wagons to roll the following dawn. The dead were buried, and the heavy wheels of the Conestogas passed over the graves to keep Indians and four-footed prowlers from locating them afterward.

IN LESS than three weeks, Chilton and Tolliver headed the train into the seething gold fields without loss of a wagon. They lingered a day or two to watch men grubbing like mad, jumping claims and shooting one another over half a pan of yellow grains, and decided they had seen enough. The same madness did not seize them. If making money as guides was, perhaps, more hazardous than holding a gold claim, at least their free roving in the open compensated for it.

Returning southward to contract for the guidance of another train leaving Sunstone, one morning they approached the rock-rimmed waterhole known as Teton Rock, a favorite camp site of wagoneers.

"Outfit camped there now," Tom said, and Wolftail nodded. Both scanned the distant figures outside the small group of four or five covered wagons. "But I don't see any oxen or horses, not even a mule."

"Bunch o' pilgrims in a fix, mebbe," grunted Tolliver, stuffing pipe in pocket.

Catching the glint of rifle and six-shooter pointed their way, the plainsmen made peace sign, but didn't slacken speed. They were the target of suspicious glances as they hammered in.

Chilton, judging a tall, lank man to be the leader, asked abruptly: "What's wrong, brother?"

"Passel of crow-hoppers run our horse herd off at dawn," replied the lanky fellow. He wore two Colt .44's, and was all in black, long-frocked broadcloth and trousers tucked into half-length boots. His thin, sharp face was adorned by blond mustache and goatee.

"The night guard, only man whose nag wasn't stolen, is out now tryin' to trail the Injuns. We're from California, pointin' for the Misery Gulch diggin's. My name's Wess Redlaw." A pause, while half-lidded gray eyes studied the buckskin men. "If you fellows are Injun scouts, maybe you'd give us a hand?"

Tom nodded, introduced himself and Wolftail. His gaze roved from the hatchet-faced Redlaw to the others grouped around the horses. They numbered a score, a small party for plains travel, and Chilton thought there was something sinister about the outfit, from the leader on down.

He'd never heard of Wess Redlaw, had no idea that he was talking to a notorious road agent and desperado of the old California gold camps, seeking a new camp to despoil. The call of gold from Misery Gulch had reached the Redlaw gang in their hideaway in the high Sierras.

Wolftail, who had been regarding the whole crowd sourly, put a question: "Don't reckon you know what tribe lifted your hosses, Redlaw?"

The bandit leader shook his head. "Can't say, not bein' used to Injuns—"

A high-keyed halloo sounded from a knoll above the wagon camp and a

lone rider tore down the slope, causing Redlaw to exclaim:

"Here comes Shag Poe, our night guard, and I reckon he's got news!"

CHAPTER IV

POWDERSMOKE PRISONER

SHAG POE had news of the horse thieves, but it assumed a secondary importance when he observed Tom Chilton sitting saddle by the wagons. Though he had seen the scout but once, at long range, Poe felt certain he was the same buckskin man whose coming had so agitated Captain Jessup, just before Chief Red Hand's bullet cut the captain down. Shag checked rein amid the clamoring bandits, disturbed to note Chilton looking at him earnestly.

Tom thought the whiskered face familiar, yet such had been the circumstances of that smoky business along the Missouri, weeks ago, that he couldn't be sure. Poe's name meant no more to the scout than did Redlaw's. But if he were the buckskin man last seen in Jessup's company, he could, if he would, clear Tom of that killing. The scout urged his mount nearer the renegade's, spoke crisply.

"Poe, my name's Chilton. Our former meetin' was at long rifle-shot, but I figure my bullets took that Injun's attention off you at a right critical time."

Despite Tom's confident manner, Shag shrewdly guessed that he was not positive in his identification. The renegade wasn't going to involve himself, perhaps get entangled with the military, and on the spur of the moment could offer no innoxious reason for his being with Captain Jessup that fateful afternoon. He looked Tom up and down unblinkingly.

"Poe's my handle, sure enough, but I don't know you. What Injun you talkin' about and where'd it happen? For more'n a month past, I've been guidin' this outfit from California, so you've got holt the wrong Poe. Ain't that right, Redlaw?"

Wess Redlaw, standing at the renegade's stirrup, faced Chilton with a vigorous nod. "Sure is. Hired Shag at Sacramento."

The truth was that Poe, afraid to rejoin his former friends, the Sioux, had ended his wanderings just a few nights since at the outlaws' campfire. Finding them kindred spirits, he was heading with the gang to Misery Gulch when loss of motive power stalled the wagons. Redlaw, although he didn't know the reason for Poe's emphatic denial, inferred he had been at some deviltry, and was quite ready to lie for a fellow criminal.

Tom Chilton's dissatisfaction showed in his lean, brown face. It was possible, he thought, to be mistaken. Yet Poe looked like suitable company for the living Cal Jessup, and the California wagoneers were a shady appearing lot.

"You didn't know Captain Jessup, of the Sixth Cavalry, over at Hazard?" Tom asked sharply.

"Never heard of him or the outfit," replied Poe. "I don't belong around here."

Wess Redlaw broke in impatiently: "What about our horses, Shag? You find 'em?"

"In walkin' range, three mile west," the renegade declared, welcoming the change of subject. "It's a big village. I made 'em out to be Teton Sioux, but the fightin' men ain't there. We'll soon have them hosses back if your whole crowd traipses along. Coupla kids are watchin' the herd on a hillside."

Poe omitted to mention it was Always Riding's village, since he had just stated the upper Missouri country wasn't his stamping ground. But Tom and Wolftail were instantly alert, knowing it must be that redoubtable war chief's band.

"YOU want to go slow," Tom cautioned, frowning. "The Sioux ain't hit the warpath in force

yet, but a little thing'll start 'em. Might be better for just me an Tolliver to go after your horses, Redlaw. We're up on such business as trickin' the Injuns."

It occurred to him, also, that the nameless girl carried off from the burned wagon train possibly had been taken to the main village by the young Teton raiders. And Tom intended looking for her, as he had promised the dying emigrant. But none of the outlaws, least of all Redlaw, would consent to wait on the wagons, and the party started, the three buckskin men leading on horseback. Tom and Wolftail were uneasy, for they wished to avert an Indian war if humanly possible.

Most of the gang were lagging at the halfway stage because of high-heeled boots. But at the end of the three miles, when tepees numbering more than a hundred appeared below a high ridge, along a sun-sparkling creek, the stragglers closed up and looked to their hardware. Tom and Wolftail, noting this, urged that the bandits remain at the foot of the ridge while they reconnoitered. Poe tarried with Redlaw, well pleased to be quit of Tom's company, for he could see the young plainsman was still in doubt concerning him.

On foot, Chilton and his pard spied out the grazing ground of the stolen horses. From the few Indian ponies in the hillside herd it was apparent that the warriors of the village were absent, perhaps on a buffalo hunt. Wherever the plainsman looked about the placid encampment, none but old men, women and children were visible. Wolftail pointed out Always Riding's lodge, tallest in the half-circle, with the crude painting of a mounted Indian on its walls of tanned buffalo hide.

"He's shifted camp since I scouted last for Jessup," said the red-haired border man. "You'n me, Tom, can stampede that hoss band and never skin a red. But keep them white cutthroats out of it!"

When they returned to the restless bandits, Tom, as he mounted, issued orders which he hoped would be obeyed. "Stay down this side of the ridge. The Injuns have no notion we're around, and with any luck we'll be drivin' your horses out double-quick."

Redlaw grunted, exchanged glances with his wolf-faced crew. "You do that," he said to Tom, "and we'll be a heap obliged, scout."

But the buckskin men were barely over the ridge and slanting for the grassy hillslope where the boy herders kept indolent watch, when Redlaw headed his impatient followers toward the ridge crest. Shag Poe had already spoken of the defenseless state of that village, and a revengeful spirit animated the Redlaw gang.

As they stood to gaze on the summit, a one-eyed prairie pirate snarled: "Old men, women and kids! We oughta sack that camp, Wess, and learn the varmints not to run off no more hosses from white men!"

Others backed him up. Redlaw nodded, his mouth forming an ugly gash beneath pony-tail mustaches. He pulled six-shooters which had cracked up the echoes on many a California stage route, declaring:

"Reckon we're agreed the red devils need a lesson. And anything worth takin', we take! What do we care if it starts a war?"

He moved down the nether slope in long strides, his robber band avidly at heel. Poe had received nothing but kindness at the hands of Always Riding's people, yet he didn't lag behind.

Shots cracked on the hillside, northward, before the road agents had gained the level. Every eye in the Teton village was turned away from the real source of danger, those twenty-two sinister figures stalking out of the east with guns in hand.

There was a flurry of dust on the hillside, clear of which pounded two leaning riders in buckskin, brandishing Colts that discharged smoky lead

skyward. They flanked a racing band of horses headed eastward. The boy herders, surprised out of their laziness, were galloping down to the tepees, screeching excitedly.

NONE of the youngsters had suffered a scratch. Tom and Wolftail had been careful of that, ducking and jeering when the Teton youths fitted shafts to bowstrings and let fly hurriedly. The scouts were in among the horses, scaring them into a wild bolt with gun blasts, and off again, driving the herd relentlessly. Indian ponies mixed with the stolen animals could be cut out later.

Chilton and Tolliver passed the north shoulder of the ridge, hazing the recaptured horses over the crest and down. They laid course for a small side canyon with a blind end, known to Wolftail. Here the horses could be corraled until the Redlaw party mounted bareback for the return trip. The horse band thundered up the canyon, and when further flight was blocked by the high wall, commenced to mill.

The scouts drew near the entrance at a sudden burst of gunfire beyond the ridge. They turned from the canyon mouth, hoping the horses wouldn't break out, and spurred for the long slope westward. The ridge base was deserted except for Poe's barefoot mount, which put off at a gallop, and the pards were in doubt as to what the continued shooting meant. With it mingled the yells of white men, the screeches of Indian women.

"Powder River!" Chilton roared. "That gang sneaked on us and jumped the village!"

"Knowed they couldn't be trusted, by criminy!" snarled Wolftail. The buckskin men were lunging upward, side by side, and coming to the top, halted.

"Would you look at that?" Wolftail gestured violently.

The scene below was worse even than they had imagined it. Like rabid wolves the outlaws were overrunning the Teton camp. Neither women nor children escaped flaming six-shooter and rifle, wielded in murderous frenzy. Here and there, from the door of a tepee, a gun spat at the ravagers as some squaw or aged warrior put up a defense.

Three or four bandits would surround one of these home defenders, send a volley crashing through the skin walls or overturn the lodge on its occupant. As the squaw or old man crawled from the wreckage, guns vomited lead to add a human wreck to the pile. A fire had started at one end of the village, and the flames, whipped by a strong west wind, leaped from lodge to lodge.

"Such white men deserve scalpin'!" Tom burst out, his face blazing. "Maybe Always Ridin's hunters will see the smoke and come home on the run. If so, I wouldn't lift a hand to help Redlaw's crowd!"

"Nor me, by criminy!" seconded Tolliver. "Looky there, Tom!" he leveled a fringed arm and kicked his horse into motion. "White girl, mebbe the one we hoped to find, and she's needin' us!"

Before Wolftail got it all out, Tom was traveling campward at arrowy speed. A white girl had popped out of a tepee, was running desperately along the village street. In pursuit of her sprang a squaw, gripping a skinning-knife. Though clad in beaded doeskin, with moccasins on her feet, the fugitive's disordered corn-gold hair proclaimed her a white girl.

TOM scarcely doubted she was the lone survivor of the wagon train massacre. Seeing the white men plundering the village, the girl must have concluded they were rescuers and rushed forth to meet them. The squaw, middle-aged but lean and active, appeared viciously determined the captive should not escape. It was customary for the plains Indians to kill all white prisoners at the moment of rescue.

Tom and Wolftail were about neck

and neck as they plunged into the smoky village street. But a few feet now separated the running women, and the scouts could discern the terror on the captive's face, turned appealingly in their direction. She realized from the flat-footed thudding behind her how fast the squaw was gaining. With rifles unslung, either plainsman could have shot the Indian woman, but refrained. It wasn't their habit to make war on women.

A shriek pealed from the white girl's lips. She stumbled and fell slackly. The squaw had leaped catlike to close the short interval, swinging her knife-hand at the girl's back. It happened just as Tom and Wolftail were thundering up. Chilton went charging by the squaw, who turned, screaming epithets. As he passed her, the scout leaned and struck her shoulder with his rifle butt. She rolled in the dust. But as Tom wheeled to ride back, the Teton woman scrambled up and darted toward some lodges still standing.

Before she could dodge into one, a six-shooter roared. The squaw flopped on her knees, then stretched out with black-braided head awry. Chilton thought Wolftail had fired the shot in an excess of rage, until he beheld Wess Redlaw sprinting through the haze of dust and smoke, a .44 in either hand. The road agent had a fiendish look, his eyes slitted, nostrils distended. He pitched another slug into the squaw's silent body and kicked it savagely. Then he caught Tom's agate-hard eyes regarding him.

"Well, she got her needin's!" Wess hollered, striding toward the plainsman. "Knifed that white girl. I was tryin' to reach 'em, but you mounted fellows got ahead of me. Let's see how the yaller-head is."

"Wasn't necessary to kill the squaw!" Tom rebuked him hotly. "You've started an Injun war with this raid, Redlaw!"

But the outlaw turned a stony ear, and Tom rode after him, even more anxious to learn of the white girl's condition. They found Wolftail seated on the ground, holding her face downward across buckskinned knees. He had wadded his bandanna over the gash in the girl's back and announced somberly:

"Right nasty, Tom, and I've seen a power o' knife cuts. Lucky she dunno nothin'."

"Crawl your saddle and I'll hand her up," directed Chilton, dismounting. "We'll get her clear of this death hole."

"Wait outside for me," Redlaw put in, ejecting the empty shells from his .44's and beginning to reload. "Got the horses, did you? I'll see what plunder the boys have gathered to tote away." He moved off to rejoin his men.

The scouts, deeply concerned over the girl, paid no heed to his going.

"PRETTY as a new-painted red wagon, ain't she, pard?" Wolftail said, swinging to saddle and reaching down. "But that wound needs a real sawbones. Where'll we take her?"

Chilton glanced at the white face on his shoulder before answering. This victim of plains warfare loosed a torrent of pity within him and s o m e t h i n g more, a pleasurable warmth.

"There's a surgeon with the Sixth at Fort Hazard, Wolftail, and Hazard's only fifteen miles or so from Teton Rock. You know what it means to carry her there, but I'm willin' to risk it if you are."

"Me willin'? Every jump in the trail, Tom. Devil with Tutt and his yellow-legs! Hand her up!"

The fighting wasn't over. Half the tepees in the village were asmoke, and the scouts threaded a perilous path to get beyond the trouble zone with their charge. Tom rode beside the burdened Wolftail to clear the way, making for the creek bank, which seemed the safest line of retreat.

From one of the lodges not afire, two struggling figures erupted, and Tom spurred ahead of Tolliver. The tussling men were a burly, bearded outlaw and a young warrior whose right leg was bound in willow withes. Presumably he had been confined to his tepee by the injury, and he stood little show in combating the bandit.

Chilton had already seen enough to make his blood boil, and he rode up with rifle poised in one hand, smashing the barrel down as the white man's head swayed toward him. The outlaw's Mexican hat partly cushioned the blow, but he was stunned to the point of releasing the Indian. The latter staggered back, fell, but rose again with a supple twist of the body, favoring his game leg.

The road agent lurched around, tilting a six-shooter at Tom. The scout narrowly ducked the bullet, for he had got a square look at the young warrior's face and was electrified to recognize the slayer of Captain Jessup! He was sure it was the same Indian because, during that powder argument down the Missouri, Tom had ridden within a hundred yards of the captain's killer before he escaped in the brush.

The outlaw wasn't through with Tom. When his first shot missed, he triggered a second, and the slug scored the neck of Chilton's horse. With a shrill whinny, it reared. The scout stuck burrlike, cuffed down the high-flung head. But as its forehoofs struck the ground, the frightened animal leaped forward, barging into the nearby tepee. The lodge collapsed on Tom, and by the time he had disentangled himself and mount, the young warrior was nowhere in sight.

"I fixed that proddy paleface, Tom. Come on!" Wolftail bawled, and pointed with smoking gun to the bandit, rigid on the ground.

Tom held a tight rein and peered about. "Where'd the Injun go? It was the buck who killed Jessup!"

"You shore?" Wolftail started. "Didn't see him after the lodge dropped. He had a broke leg or somethin'."

Tom rode to and fro in hasty search, thinking that a man with a broken leg couldn't get far away in such a short time. But the Indian was either well hidden or able to move faster than Tom had believed. He rejoined Tolliver and they hurried on creekward.

The scouts were nearly two hundred yards from the doomed village and holding to an easterly course, with no intention of waiting for the Redlaw gang, when loud hails reached them. They turned in saddles to see Wess and a half dozen of his men running to catch up.

CHAPTER V

The Crimson Cavalcade

"WHERE you ridin' with that girl?" shouted Redlaw. "I helped rescue her. Wait!" But the frontiersmen didn't slow their pace.

The outlaw leader carried a long-haired, dripping scalp; so did two of his companions. Tom's face darkened as he noticed them and, hipped in his saddle, he raised the Henry repeater.

"We're takin' the girl to the army surgeon at Hazard, you woman-scalper!" Tom barked. "You're worse'n any war-painted Injun, Redlaw, and what you done today will prod Always Ridin' on a path o' slaughter. I oughtn't to tell you, but your horses are corraled in a box canyon over yonder. Get 'em and get goin', is my advice, if you aim to reach Misery Gulch with your hair on!"

Wess and his men had halted as the scouts kept on the move and Tom menaced them with his Henry. The road agents had heard of those long-firing rifles and what execution they could do in a sure-shot's hands. Redlaw cursed and let the scouts go their way. Chilton's warning to quit the region before the warriors returned

was worthy of being heeded. The gang had better be ahorse while the trail was open.

"Where's Poe?" snarled Redlaw. "He'll know about this box canyon."

Shag Poe hadn't been conspicuous in the raiding. Low as he was, he wouldn't have scalped a woman, and he eyed the Redlaw trophies with disfavor when the outlaws found him. Wess repeated the scout's warning, and Poe agreed it was high time they got out of the plundered village. He told the bandits, now gathered in force, where the horses probably were cached and started looking for his own mount. The barefoot pony was gone from the ridgeside, but he persisted in his search.

Poe wouldn't have lingered had he guessed how near was Always Riding's buffalo hunting party. His pony had been seized by young Chief Red Hand, who found it wandering on the village outskirts. During a hunt some days previously, Red Hand had had his leg gored by a wounded bull buffalo. The injury hadn't kept him from opening up on one of the white invaders from his lodge door. But, caught with empty gun, he would have gone under had it not been for Chilton's interference.

Recognition was mutual between white scout and red warrior. And although he realized Tom had saved his life, apparently wasn't a party to the raiding, the young Teton had fled while there was opportunity to do so. He purposed to bring back Always Riding and the fighting men of the tribe, knowing where they had gone that morning to run buffalo.

Skimming northward on Poe's pony, which looked familiar, Red Hand had covered not more than a mile or two before he saw the hunters riding toward him in hot haste. He joined them, learned that they had started homeward when heavy smoke clouds on the southern horizon seemed to indicate enemy attack on the village. Always Riding, leading his grim warriors, thought it might be the horse soldiers. But Red Hand, wheeling alongside the war chief, informed him they were white strangers.

SHAG POE beheld that mad red cavalcade coming while yet afoot, and he dived into a rocky pocket before he was seen. But the bandits, trailing toward the box canyon, were sighted. Swiftly the Sioux surrounded them on the open plain, and above the gun thunder pealed the wild scalp yell.

Tom and Wolftail, hurrying eastward, faintly heard the uproar behind. They guessed its import and only regretted that the massacre of the outlaws was unlikely to appease the Sioux. Not alone the Tetons, but the Brule and Hunkpapa Sioux, the Cheyennes and the Blackfeet were certain to paint for war and avenge that ruined village.

The scouts well knew the danger they were incurring for the sake of the wounded girl. They agreed, however, that the tame surrender to the post commander wasn't to be thought of. Somehow, after delivering their charge into the surgeon's care, they'd outwit the Sixth Cavalry and lose themselves on the plains. The soldiers would shortly have plenty to do besides chasing a couple of frontiersmen skilled in the art of dodging enemies.

As the girl's condition imposed a slow rate of travel, it was after nightfall when Tom and Wolftail were halted at the stockade by the sentry's challenge and clicking carbine.

"Who's there?"

"Scouts with a white girl saved from the Injuns," replied Chilton, not recognizing the soldier as any enlisted man of the Sixth that he knew.

"Pass, scouts!" clipped the blue-clad figure.

The horses resumed a trot, slowing down again in front of headquarters. Light shining from several win-

dows was reflected in long yellow rectangles edging the parade.

Their faces gave no hint of taut nerves as they encountered an orderly at the open door. Tom's repeater was cradled in left arm. But that orderly wasn't the one who usually attended Colonel Tutt, and when the trooper caught sight of the girl, he gasped.

"Gosh, is she dead? Step in, boys. I'll tell the major on the run!"

"Major?" repeated Tom, his jaw dropping. "Not Major Dillon, of the Fourth Cavalry, Fort Laramie? We expected to find Colonel Tutt's regiment here."

They were inside by then, Wolftail as astonished as his pard.

The trim orderly explained: "He's over west of here a hundred miles, holdin' down Fort Defiance. We come up by steamboat, replacin' the Sixth, couple of weeks ago. You must have fetched the orders for the colonel to move, Chilton."

"Well, I wouldn't know," gulped Tom. When the orderly disappeared, he put his mouth to Wolftail's ear. "If old 'Ramrod' Tutt left any word about us, we still ain't out of the woods, though the major's a square man!"

Side-whiskered Major Bertram Dillon, of amiable disposition, though he could be stern if necessary, was unaware that Tom's rifle covered him until it became evident he knew nothing of the scouts' outlawed status. Within ten minutes the late Sioux captive was lodged in the nearby hospital, with the regimental surgeon working over her. She had not regained consciousness, but Doctor Sawyer promised good results.

SO TOM and Wolftail faced the major once more at headquarters in a relieved state of mind. Everything appeared to be working out all right, until Major Dillon asked abruptly:

"How do you like your new quarters at Fort Defiance?"

Before Tolliver could blunder with one of his blunt speeches, Tom said hastily: "We're not scoutin' for the Sixth, major. On our own, now, guidin' wagon trains."

Dillon plucked his sideburns, eyebrows raised. Then he smiled. "I guess I understand. You had a falling-out with the colonel, eh? But I'm sorry you quit. That was bad business at Always Riding's village and we'll hear from it. I'm subject to Colonel Tutt's orders if he needs me, and stand ready to go to the relief of any wagon or pack trains."

He stared thoughtfully at the buckskinned Indian fighters. "Boys, why not let me put you back on the army payroll? At least, hang around the post a week or so and see what happens. I'd consider myself lucky to have you two along when I take the field."

"If we'd got a square deal—" began Wolftail, but was silenced by a furtive swipe of Tom's moccasin.

"We'll do it, major," nodded the younger scout. "Want to see how that girl comes around, anyhow. Let me tell you about our findin' a burned wagon train. There was an old codger, able to say just a few words, that we reckon might've been the girl's pap. . . ."

That fact was proven when, a few days later, her rescuers visited the girl at the post hospital. Jill Gregory was her name, and her joy at meeting the buckskin men changed to sorrow as she recounted her misadventures. She and her father, Tennesseans, had been en route to the gold fields when the young Tetons assaulted the strung-out train.

"Those horrible, painted butchers!" Jill cried bitterly. "But I'm glad you saw pappy before he died. Was he—"

"Not scalped, no," Tom comforted. "Wagon had overturned somehow and the reds missed him." He hitched his chair closer and reached for the slim hands on the coverlet. "Miss Jill, you're not to worry no more'n you

can help. Got any plans? No. Well, soon's you're up to it, we'll make some. That is, if I ain't busyin' myself where I'm not wanted."

"Indeed, you're not!" Jill's blue-eyed gaze was very earnest.

On the other side of the hospital bed, Wolftail Tolliver looked away to hide a sympathetic, understanding grin. Tom would be getting spliced one of these days, if Wolftail could read sign!

Tom was hard hit, but before he asked Jill Gregory to share the lot of a scout and plainsman, that murder charge must be disproved. Having identified Captain Jessup's slayer as one of Always Riding's warriors, Chilton at first considered going in search of him. But he finally agreed with Wolftail that the Tetons had doubtless moved camp back into the mountains, to make war medicine. And his chances of finding the soldier killer would be equally good if he waited for the cavalry to march against the Sioux. Red war was sure to break out soon.

Tom now firmly believed that Shag Poe had been Jessup's companion and a witness to the killing, but he had little hope of ever seeing Shag again. It was hardly possible that he had escaped the vengeance of the Sioux.

A week went by and no news of an Indian outbreak. Tom and Wolftail had got back their old mounts from Jim Wingo, selling the other two to gold seekers leaving Roaring Bend. Riding the black and the roan, they left the fort one morning for the river town, to swap talk with their mule-skinner friends.

"Somethin' cross-wind, T o m," Wolftail remarked, squinting at a clamorous crowd in the sod-walled wagon yard as they approached upstreet.

Tom stared and quickened his pace with punching spurs. "Looks like a lynchin.' Feller with his neck in a noose—wearin' buckskin, too!"

THEY loped into the yard, stopping on the fringe of the vociferous mob, freighters, Roaring Bend citizens and newcomers off a Missouri stern-wheeler which had docked the night before. In the background reared the tongue of a freight wagon, no doubt intended to serve as a gallows.

"Poe!" Tom suddenly shouted at close view of the neck-roped buckskin man. "Hey, Jim, wait a minute!"

Wingo, the freighter, and several others were dragging the whiskered Poe toward the wagon, but they halted at the explosive yell. Tom dived from the saddle and shouldered through the crowd, Wolftail not far behind him.

Shag fixed protruding eyes on the scouts as they faced him and the irate freighters.

"What's he been doin', Jim?" Tom clipped.

"Caught him dead to rights stealin' a hoss." Wingo eyed his friends in surprise. "We ain't botherin' to deal in the camp marshal—"

"Jim," Chilton interposed sharply, "this feller'd be more use alive than dead—that is, to me. I'd thank you to let us have him without any fuss. Poe denies it, but I'm sure he saw the Injun bump off Jessup, like I once told you. See what it means to me?"

Wingo clawed his beard. "I do, Tom—if you're dead shore. We oughtn't to let a hoss thief go, but—"

"He's rope-jiggin' right now!" an angry voice shouted Wingo down.

Tom and Wolftail, in unison, shifted rifles to bend of arm from a ground-rest.

"That'll be enough of that, bigmouth!" the younger scout rapped at the speaker. "This hangin' ain't legal nohow, and you can take your choice of givin' Poe up peaceful or in the smoke!"

"Here, now, we don't want no fracas with you boys over such trash!" Jim Wingo cried. "If he's useful to you, Tom, take him!" The freighter

swiftly loosened the noose on Poe's thick neck, jerked it away and shoved the renegade toward the scouts. Then Wingo palmed a gunstock and backed up until he stood shoulder to shoulder with Tom and Wolftail, for some of the disappointed lynchers looked ready to fight it out.

Tom had thrust Poe between himself and Wolftail, and gripped him with iron fingers.

"How'd you get away from the Sioux?" the scout demanded.

"Hid in a hill pocket when they jumped the Redlaw outfit," sullenly answered Poe. "The Injuns found the hosses in the canyon. My hoss was gone, and you bet I didn't take chances tryin' to catch another. Leavin' at nightfall, I footed it to this place. Been kinda layin' low, knowin' you and your pard was around. All I wanted, Chilton, was a hoss to carry me to Misery Gulch, but I didn't have no money, nothin' to trade for one."

"Admittin' you lied, then, at Redlaw's camp?" said Tom. "You were with Cap Jessup when he was shot. I saw the young Injun that did it in the Teton village, by the way. Poe, I'm accused of that shootin', and a few words from you will clear me. How about it?"

Shag hesitated, glanced sidelong at the angry freighters facing the guns of Tolliver and Wingo.

"What's in it for me to talk?" he asked huskily.

"I'll let those boys stretch you," Tom said grimly, "if you don't. I know you're the right man. Come along and spill it to Major Dillon."

"Major Dillon!" Poe jerked as though it were a name he feared. "Not me! I don't want to see that yellow-leg!"

A horseman in army blue just then scattered the crowd, shouting as he spied the buckskin men.

"Hey, Chilton and Tolliver! The major wants you to report at once for trail duty. Injuns are up!"

CHAPTER VI

Powderhorn Ridge

WHEN the scouts pounded up to headquarters, Chilton and Poe both on the black horse, the bugles were sounding. Shag, still savagely protesting, was hauled into the major's presence.

Dillon stood behind his desk, smoking briskly and pulling on his gauntlets. Saber and pistol were belted on.

He clipped out: "A courier arrived a short time ago, falling dead from an arrow wound as he delivered Colonel Tutt's message. The Sixth Cavalry is besieged on Powderhorn Ridge by more than a thousand Sioux, Cheyennes and Blackfeet. Desperate straits. We march immediately. Know where Powderhorn Ridge is, don't you? Good! But who's that hangdog specimen?"

The officer leaned forward, gloved fists resting on the desk top, to scan the heavily bearded visage. The renegade cringed in the grip of the two plainsmen.

"He was with the Redlaw gang," Tom explained. "I didn't mention him before, major, but his name's Poe. He's been a heap upset since I spoke of you, over in town."

"It's not to be wondered at!" exclaimed Dillon, blazing with sudden anger. "I know him as one of the worst renegades on the border. A year ago, back on the Platte, he decoyed an ammunition train I had charge of into an Ogala ambush. We narrowly escaped massacre because of this rascal!"

"That's what I figured him!" gritted Tom. "Major Dillon, we haven't much time, but there's somethin' weighin' heavy on Wolftail and me that's got to come out sooner or later. I want to speak my mind now because Poe knows I didn't kill Captain Jessup."

"Jessup!" repeated Dillon, bewildered. "I didn't know he was dead. What're you trying to tell me, Chilton?"

"It's been plain enough since we returned that Colonel Tutt didn't leave no word about us," Tom replied. As briefly as possible he related the circumstances of Jessup's death, adding: "I'm charged with it, but Poe saw that killin', probably was well acquainted with the young Teton. Speak up, Poe, and tell the major!"

But Shag, enraged at the scout for haling him before Dillon, shook a stubborn head, his eyes black slits of malice.

"Dunno nothin' about it!" he snarled. "Wasn't there—never knowed Jessup."

Dillon was a man of quick decision. "I'm for you, Chilton! Captain Jessup was no credit to the army. And whether you're innocent or guilty, I need you and Tolliver to help me reach the colonel. Orderly!" he cracked out, turning. "Send in the guard to take charge of this renegade!"

SHAG POE was cursing like a maniac when, a few minutes later, he was led from headquarters. Before provost guard and prisoner would have had time to reach the guardhouse, the blast of a carbine cut through the sounds of troops preparing to take the trail. As the major and the scouts emerged upon the veranda, a red-faced sergeant galloped up to report that Poe, not being bound, had leaped to the empty saddle of a troop horse and dashed through the main gate. He was being pursued.

"My guess is he won't be retaken," growled Tom. "Not with a head-start. He's devilish lucky thataway. Although he seemed to be at outs with the Sioux—hid to keep from bein' scalped when they massacred the Redlaw gang—I reckon he'll streak it for the red chiefs on the Powderhorn. He can make himself solid with the information we're ridin' to the relief. Bad break! Got to watch sharp for ambush."

Tom sprang from the porch edge to saddle. Wolftail and the major swapped grins when they saw him headed for the hospital building. He was gone just long enough to bid Jill Gregory good-by; trotted back as the bugles sounded brazen notes and the regiment, by column of fours, swung toward the stockade gate. Three huge cannons trundled along at the rear.

The cavalry outstripped the artillery in that forced march to Tutt's relief. Lacking exact information, the scouts and Major Dillon held opinion that the Sixth had got wind of the tribes mustering for the warpath in the mountains, and left Fort Defiance to disperse them. Apparently more warriors had responded to the rallying call of Always Riding than anticipated by the colonel. And the Sixth had ridden into a trap, for Powderhorn Ridge was on the edge of the foothills.

All day Chilton, Tolliver and the buckskin men regularly attached to the Fourth Cavalry, headed north by west. As they approached Powderhorn River, the vanguard was keenly strung to detect an ambuscade. The troops kept to the open plains, avoiding wooded ridges, brushy swales and boulder fields. For, since the getaway of Poe, it was believed they hadn't a remote chance of taking the hostiles by surprise.

At sundown the prominent ridge, flat-topped and rising steeply above the willow-bordered Powderhorn River, loomed to the straining gaze of scouts and cavalrymen. For a long time they had been listening to intermittent rifle-fire and wondering how the Sixth was holding out. A series of low, flanking hills hid from them a view of the ululating redmen, though, in the fading light, tiny figures of comrades-in-arms atop the ridge were visible to the men on the darkening prairie.

Expecting the Indians to ride pell-mell from the hills, Dillon ordered the far-extended ranks to close up and form in battle line. But, barring a few scouting pony riders, they saw

nothing of the red besiegers, and the last golden gleam burned out in the west.

"THEY won't strike now until dawn," said Tom Chilton, dismounting beside the major, after a ride close in toward the hills. "If you and Colonel Tutt could get 'em in a crossfire, you might whipsaw the bunch, though there's a power o' lodges up and down the river, inside them hills."

"I've such a plan of attack in mind," Dillon replied, "but I want to be certain the colonel can hold up his end. From the fitful firing, just before dark, I'd say their ammunition was nearly exhausted. We don't know how many men they've lost, either. Think they could've seen us?"

"Pretty dark on the prairie, when we got here," said the scout, shaking his head. "I'm your man, major, if you want someone to slip through that red circle and find out how Tutt's fixed to support you."

"Both of us, Tom." Wolftail stood nearby in the gloom, leaning on his breechloader.

"One at a time," said Tom firmly. "If I don't make the grade, you can try, pard."

So it was decided. But when Tom left the command to cross the half-mile to the hill range, on foot, and taking only six-shooters and knife, Wolftail trailed along to watch him pad softly down a draw and disappear. The red-haired plainsman squatted in the sage clumps, rifle across knees. He waited for some unusual excitement beyond the hill barrier to proclaim that Chilton was in tight quarters.

Not that the assembled villages were burdened with peace and quiet. Drums were throbbing and dancers whirling, stamping, chanting, savage silhouettes against leaping bonfires, as Tom Chilton wormed his way over and around boulders jumbled in the draw bottom. The war making was at its height.

The blue-clad reinforcements were being watched. But the Sioux, Cheyennes and Blackfeet deemed themselves too strong to be turned from their purpose of annihilating the Sixth Cavalry, on the high ridge above. Only consummate craft had enabled Tom and Wolftail to slip by the Indian vedettes posted outside the hills.

Tom crossed the river at a ford, wetting buckskin breeches to the knees. He gained the shelter of an empty lodge, crouched there with the war chant ringing in his ears and pondering whether he could make the next pool of shadow, a hundred yards away. He'd be but briefly in the open. The fires and the dancers were at the upper bend of the Powderhorn.

The scout could imagine the beleaguered troopers looking from the top of the hundred-foot wall at the savage scene, and calculating their chances of ultimate survival. But for the steep heights, toward which the Sixth must have struggled under galling fire, the united bands would now be singing victory songs and stretching scalps on willow hoops.

Chilton, unfamiliar with Powderhorn Ridge, had been advised by Wolftail of the rugged trail to the top, a pathway which Tutt's troopers had held desperately against climbing red riders. The scout took a deep breath and darted past the tepee. He leaped prodigiously, scarcely seeming to touch ground. No hue and cry had been raised when he plunged into friendly shadow at the base of the ridge.

TOM began to climb, through brush and over scab-rock. Repeated charges of the Indians upslope had worn a more or less clear passage to the summit. The scout had good reason to think his medicine strong for success. But an enemy made that day had been looking from the upper end of camp when he streaked for the foot of the ridge.

Shag Poe, watching the wild danc-

ers with the firelight in his eyes, wasn't sure he had seen a flash of buckskin when he turned half-blind gaze briefly toward the outlying darkness. He spoke to a group of braves not taking part in the dance, and they followed him, fierce-eyed, drawing tomahawks. At the spot where Poe had glimpsed movement of some kind, many hands dragged the ground and felt the moist tracks of the scout's moccasins.

No outcry succeeded the discovery, though it was evident a messenger had broken through to the regiment on the ridge top. Poe, whom Always Riding had once more welcomed as a friend for bringing word of the relief troops' advance, grinned savagely when it occurred to him that Chilton was as likely to have made the venture as anyone. Renegade and redskins conferred, low-voiced, Shag arguing that they could easily capture the scout on his way back if all was quiet. There were no dissenters, and Poe crouched amid the fierce warriors, impatient to settle a score.

Tom, meantime, had achieved the ridge summit, letting it be known who he was before alert sentries' carbines stopped his Indian crawl. The soldiers were not aware that reinforcements had bivouacked beyond the hills, and Tom was quickly escorted to Colonel Tutt. Though the troopers felt like cheering and singing at the good news, they curbed any emotional outburst so that the Indians wouldn't suspect a messenger had penetrated their circle.

Colonel Tutt arose from a flat-topped boulder, and by the star-shine Tom noted his haggard appearance. Three days of siege had put their mark on him, and his men as well, but there was no let-down in determination to fight to the last cartridge.

"Tom Chilton, eh?" said Tutt, but the old arrogance was lacking. His tone expressed only surprise. "I didn't suppose you'd come back to the upper Missouri."

"Must prove a guilty conscience ain't botherin' me, colonel," the scout replied. "Major Dillon, sir, wishes to report himself ready to attack around dawn, with four troops of the Fourth and three cannons. Wants to know how you're fixed for ammunition, if you can hit the Indians from the rear when he charges across the Powderhorn on their front."

Colonel Tutt brightened. "Yes!" he said with his old vigor, and imparted details which the scout was to carry back to Major Dillon. The Sixth had lost men and horses. Their ammunition and rations were low, desperately low, and but for the pool of water in a hollow of the great ridge, they would have suffered intensely. When his supply train, trying to follow him across the Powderhorn, was cut off and destroyed by the Indians, Tutt had sent three couriers to Fort Hazard. Each left at a different hour of the first night of the siege.

"Only one got there," Tom said grimly, "and he had an arrow clear through him, the major told me."

"Brave fellow!" Tutt's voice was husky. "They were all brave lads, Chilton. I'm sorry."

Tom hadn't seen Sergeant Murgatroyd and guessed that the vindictive trooper was among the casualties on the ridge top.

"MY COMPLIMENTS to Major Dillon, and luck to you, scout," Colonel Tutt said as Chilton turned to go. "Here's my hand. I may have been too hasty in my judgment. At any rate, you're a whole man to risk bringing us the major's message. You could have refused."

Tom grinned in the shadow of wide hat brim, clasped the extended hand, "Volunteered, as a matter of fact, colonel. I'm not out of the woods till I pass Dillon's pickets."

He moved away between dim lines of troopers, uplifted by their hearty but low-spoken words of praise and hope. Tom had raised the battered spirit of the regiment from dark

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depths. He still glowed with satisfaction as he went by the sentries at the top of the slope and began cautious descent.

War-bonneted heads upreared from the foot of the ridge. Hostile hands swung tomahawks and thrust lances at him. Tom recognized Poe's yell of triumph as he jerked guns. Flame spat from the muzzles to touch more than one brave with death, but they wanted him alive and the flat-sided wallop of a tomahawk staggered him. His .44's sagged, slipped from his hands, then his knees caved.

Chilton gradually became conscious of his surroundings and a limited power of movement. Thonged wrist and ankle, he lay beside a dull-glowing firepit in a tepee. He wasn't alone. A young warrior squatted on his heels, strangely regarding Tom. Hideously painted, but a splendid savage figure, with war bonnet trailing down his coppery back. The scout jerked and peered closer, head lifted off the ground.

"The very redskin I've been hankerin' to meet!" Tom exclaimed. "Why'd you shoot that horse soldier, who was with your friend, Poe, down the Missouri a few weeks ago? This your lodge?"

"Prison lodge," corrected Red Hand, his black eyes suddenly fierce. "Poe no friend, no good, but Chief Always Riding think so. Horse soldier no good, too, me killum!" The hostility in that glance was not, then, for the helpless plainsman.

Tom changed to the Sioux dialect. "Let my red brother explain. We have the same thoughts about those two white men, but what were they doing at that place on the river?"

Red Hand's revealing speech astonished Tom, even though he had had no high opinion of Captain Cal Jessup. He believed he understood the captain's motive in scheming such treachery, though that was beyond the Teton's power to reason out.

"Red Hand," said Tom, for the chief had named himself in recounting the Jessup killing, "served well the ends of justice. But that does not help my case. I have been accused of shooting the horse soldier. I am in danger of hanging or of being sent to the white man's prison unless I can clear myself."

The young Sioux looked grave. He declared his unbounded gratitude to the scout for aiding him during the outlaw raid, and his willingness to help establish Chilton's innocence, short of riding within reach of the soldiers. Tom didn't blame him on that score, either.

"It is to help you, white scout," pursued Red Hand, "that I am here. You have been like a dead man long enough for the chiefs to decide what shall be done with you. I have just come from the council lodge. At dawn you are to run the gauntlet, where the horse soldiers on the ridge can see and know, when you are struck down, that no message you were to carry ever reached the horse soldiers outside the hills. The gauntlet, white scout, offers little more chance for life than the stake."

Tom's lean face was rigid. "I know. But there's more on your chest. Get it off!"

"When you are turned free to run between the warrior lines none will have rifles, only weapons to club the runner to death. At the signal to start, do not enter that lane of death. Turn toward the river, less than a hundred yards away. Below the embankment I will be waiting with my fastest pony. You will have a running chance, white scout, no more!"

Red Hand unbent, hooded his blanket about him and stalked from the lodge.

CHAPTER VII

Frontier Justice

NO MAN that Tom had ever heard of had lived through the ordeal he faced as the rose dawn flushed the east. Freeing his ankles, two warriors conducted the scout

from the prison lodge to the comparatively level ground between the steep-sided ridge and the tepee-lined river bank.

That there were well above a thousand fighting men of the allied tribes, Chilton might easily believe when he saw the assemblage. That estimate did not include the squaws, who looked eagerly forward to prowling the battlefield when the soldiers had been defeated and killing disabled survivors with clubs and rocks.

In full view and easy carbine shot of the anxious troopers peering from the summit of Powderhorn Ridge, two columns, with at least a hundred warriors in each, had formed. A narrow lane between the lines was the speedway for the gauntlet runner. All three tribes, Sioux, Cheyenne and Blackfeet, were represented in the fierce hawkish or flat faces, war painted and crested with wind-stirred eagle feathers.

Insulting cries arose as the long-haired scout approached under guard. The Indians were taunting the soldiers, inviting them to look at the man on whom their hopes had rested. He had got through the red cordon once, but failed the second time, thus preventing co-operation of the two regiments.

The Sixth might have fired into the jeering, colorful multitude, but it had too little ammunition to throw any of it away. And perhaps Colonel Tutt was thinking of the chance, so slim as to be almost no chance at all, that Tom would break through in a stirring finish.

Only weapons which could be wielded handily at short range were in evidence, tomahawks, stone war clubs and the like, for shooting the runner wasn't permitted. It would end the sport too soon. The Indians derived pleasure from testing a captive's speed and endurance under the crushing blows aimed at him. If he could run the gauntlet, dodging and twisting, and fold fast to life, he was supposed to have won his freedom. But the chances were all against it.

"Ho! A brave man comes to die!" exclaimed a tall Sioux in war bonnet and Hudson Bay blanket, one of a group of chiefs who stood a little way from the head of the double column. The scout's resolute bearing had called forth this tribute. And Tom, glancing at the speaker, had no doubt it was Always Riding, the Teton war chief.

The rawhides on his wrists were ripped away as the frontiersman was halted a short distance from the double line-up. Despite the mad yelling of the Indians, Tom's attention was sharply focused on the first figure in the column nearest the river. Peering avidly from matted beard, Shag Poe waited to strike with clubbed six-shooter. He had been given a position of honor in the line because it was mainly through him that Tom had fallen into enemy hands.

"It's the windup, Chilton," Poe derided, "and I git first whack. Stretch them buckskin shanks, now!"

CHIEF ALWAYS RIDING lifted copper-banded arm, dropped it with a piercing yell. It was the signal that Tom, elbows pressed to his sides and balanced on the balls of his feet, had been awaiting! He shot forward as though to bound along the lane of death, but at the head of the double column he swerved.

Poe was before him. A mighty fist crashed into the gloating face. Shag's upraised gun was torn from his fingers. The Colt bellowed, muzzle turned against the reeling form, and the renegade went sidewise and down. Tom sprang across him, firing at the Indian next to Poe, who had wheeled with tomahawk upflung. The hatchet missed, and the warrior folded, a bullet between his glaring eyes.

Then Tom was dashing on, traveling in zigzags to derange enemy aim. For a moment the vast assemblage of warriors and squaws was stricken silent, immovable. The soldiers on

Powderhorn Ridge were first to break that stunned quiet with maniacal shrieks of encouragement.

But presently the whooping of the Indians drowned them out. War clubs and tomahawks sailed after the racing scout. Hot lead snarled and arrows hummed as the red spectators strove to halt his flight. The troops on the ridge opened up as warriors sprang in pursuit, and many Indians faced about to answer the lashing fire of the carbines.

Though Tom kept eyes to the front, he knew what was going on behind him. The Sixth had chipped in to hold some of the redmen back. A tomahawk grazed his shoulder, an arrow sped between his fanning legs. Tom's goal was that willow-fringed river beyond the tepees, and he'd reach it if his luck held just a little longer!

Between two lodges he thudded at a foot-gallop, stumbled on the lip of the bank as a low-flying bullet cut his leg. He caught his balance and dived from view of Indians and troopers. Near the water's edge stood Chief Red Hand, gripping the jaw-rope of a rangy piebald pony, and he made approving guttural sound when Tom came tumbling over the embankment.

The scout, with a grateful word, jerked the rope bridle out of the chief's hand, leaped to the pony's back and kicked the half-wild animal into the river. Red Hand, knowing what he might expect if caught in this act of treachery to the tribesmen, scuttled along the narrow shore, his body bent. The young Teton's objective was the heavy greenery growing out of the sloping bank, but the foremost of Tom's pursuers were already at the top.

They saw the mounted scout in the river and, closer at hand, the scurrying sub-chief. A bowstring twanged and Red Hand pitched on his face, chanting a dirge which bespoke a mortal wound.

The sound reached Tom and he faced back. He spied the writhing form, knew that his red benefactor would be tortured to the last life spark if the outraged Indians laid hands on him. The young chief was making futile effort to crawl, with a feathered shaft protruding from his back. Tom swung the piebald in a sparkling shower and forced it shoreward. Poe's Colt, in the grip of a gunmaster, smoked lead at the shooting redmen, whose numbers increased every moment.

UNDER fire, the scout gained the shore and thrust a long arm down to seize Red Hand by beaded belt and haul him upward. Leaning over the helpless chief, his face in the piebald's streaming mane, Tom wheeled back into the river, shouting defiance. Lead and arrows pelted the Powderhorn's surface all around the splashing, double-burdened pony.

Suddenly Wolftail Tolliver's war cry soared from the far bank. He had waited all night at the edge of the hills, hoping for some chance to aid Tom when the latter didn't return. Following a brief visit to the bivouacked Fourth, he came now astride his roan, fetching Tom's Henry repeater as well as his own breechloader.

The red-haired plainsman was getting the range of Indians spilling down the opposite bank into the river, as he rode to meet Chilton, the water just reaching the saddle girths. He ceased firing long enough to hand Tom his rifle, and safe retreat was assured when Tom joined his pard in hurling lead at long range.

Two dripping horses scrambled up the east bank, plunged onward for the encircling hills. Indian vedettes, past whom Wolftail had slipped while the uproar in camp claimed their attention, scattered out of the way as the plainsmen faced front and opened fire on them.

The moment they debouched from hill to plain, Tom Chilton raised a mighty yell, for Major Dillon's four cavalry troops were coming up at a

fast trot. The cannons were being dragged close behind. Tom tried to withdraw the arrow from Red Hand's back; succeeded, though it could do no good. The young Teton was dying, his blood crimsoning Tom's buckskins. They wheeled alongside Major Dillon.

"Major," Chilton called, his long hair afloat in the morning breeze, "I'm glad to report Colonel Tutt is able to support your attack! I was a prisoner and the Injuns are trailin' us, but if you hit 'em with everything you've got, they're busted!"

Dillon unsheathed his saber with a rasp and shouted orders. The bugles sang and hoofs pounded across the plain. Up on Powderhorn Ridge, Colonel Tutt saw that charging mass of army blue and his own buglers prolonged the wild, challenging notes. Tom had laid Red Hand on the ground, remounted. He rode with the major and Wolftail in that thundering charge, past the hills and into the river. The pursuing Indians had turned back at the ringing of the trumpets, the ground-quaking drum of hoofs.

Down the steep trail from the ridge filed Tutt's troopers, hastily forming into battle line on level ground and opening a hot fire. Nearly all the warriors had mounted as the pony herds were rushed in from grazing. The squaws were fleeing on foot without striking the lodges. Cavalry from the ridge, cavalry from the river. Carbines barking death front and rear. The cannon hurled screaming shells from the east bank, which exploded with frightful havoc among valiantly fighting redmen.

Carbines empty, the soldiers had little or no time to reload.

"Draw sabers! Charge!" pealed the order, and the tribesmen fled through the westward hills as slashing steel proved irresistible.

Through it all Tom and Wolftail rode hard, shot true and collected but few scratches in return. When the bugles recalled the victors, the plainsmen had had a surfeit of battle. Rather sadly Tom watched the tossing war bonnets fade into the west and drop from sight in the rolls of the plain.

"Poor devils!" he muttered, smearing blood, powder smudge and sweat together with a swipe of buckskin sleeve.

Wolftail, beside him, nodded. "Aye, the poor devils!"

Tom turned the piebald. "Let's go back and see if that Injun's still breathin'. Tell you about him as we go."

THOUGH the scout had little hope of it, Red Hand was alive and lingered on until the troops returned from destroying the villages. Colonel Tutt and Major Dillon rode up to the little group formed by Tom, Wolftail and the suffering chief. And Red Hand, his painted features a mask of hatred for all white men but the one supporting him there on the prairie, gutturally confessed to the slaying of Captain Jessup.

Tom supplied the motive, as revealed to him by the young Teton, and the tale of Jessup's planned treachery left both officers slack-jawed. Red Hand went limp in Chilton's arms. The war bonnet which had so often fluttered defiance to the white invaders, dipped toward the ground at last.

"I owe you an apology, Scout Chilton," said Colonel Tutt, the stern lines of his face softening. "You're free to come and go as you please, now. You and Tolliver. I hope you'll return to scouting duty, though the results of this fight may lead to a patching up of peace."

Tom grinned in generous token of acceptance.

Not so Wolftail, who snorted: "Thankee for nothin', Colonel Tutt! I won't forget easy that Tom and me run ourselves bowlegged to keep out o' your way!"

But the weary colonel merely bobbed his chin.

Tom Chilton, bearing Red Hand in powerful arms, walked toward the horses, among which stood his black saddler. Wolftail, at a nod, had tagged along, and when they rode toward the hills the redhead was towing the piebald pony.

On the west bank of the Powderhorn, with the smoke of burning lodges drifting over them, the pards dismounted. They were busy for some time, and at the last, Tom led the piebald beneath Red Hand's burial scaffold and shot it with his .44. It was the custom to send a warrior's mount with him to the spirit land.

Side by side the buckskin men jogged back toward the cavalry camp. Tom's gaze was on the sunrise road, at the end of which stood Fort Hazard. Wolftail, stuffing his pipe, noted the trend of Tom's glance.

He spoke: "She'll be waitin', boy with open arms. I wish—"

The red-haired scout paused and Tom fixed him with a searching eye.

"Yes," said Chilton, "I was thinkin' of Jill, right enough. My name's cleared, and tomorrow we'll be talkin' over them plans to make a new beginnin'. But what d'you wish, Wolftail? We're still pards when Jill takes me for better or worse, you know!"

"Sure, sure!" Wolftail's nod was vigorous. "It wasn't that, Tom. I congratulate you both. But," he added with a chuckle, "I wish there was a piece o' caliker a-waitin' yonder for me. By criminy, I ain't too old to fall in love—only forty-odd!"

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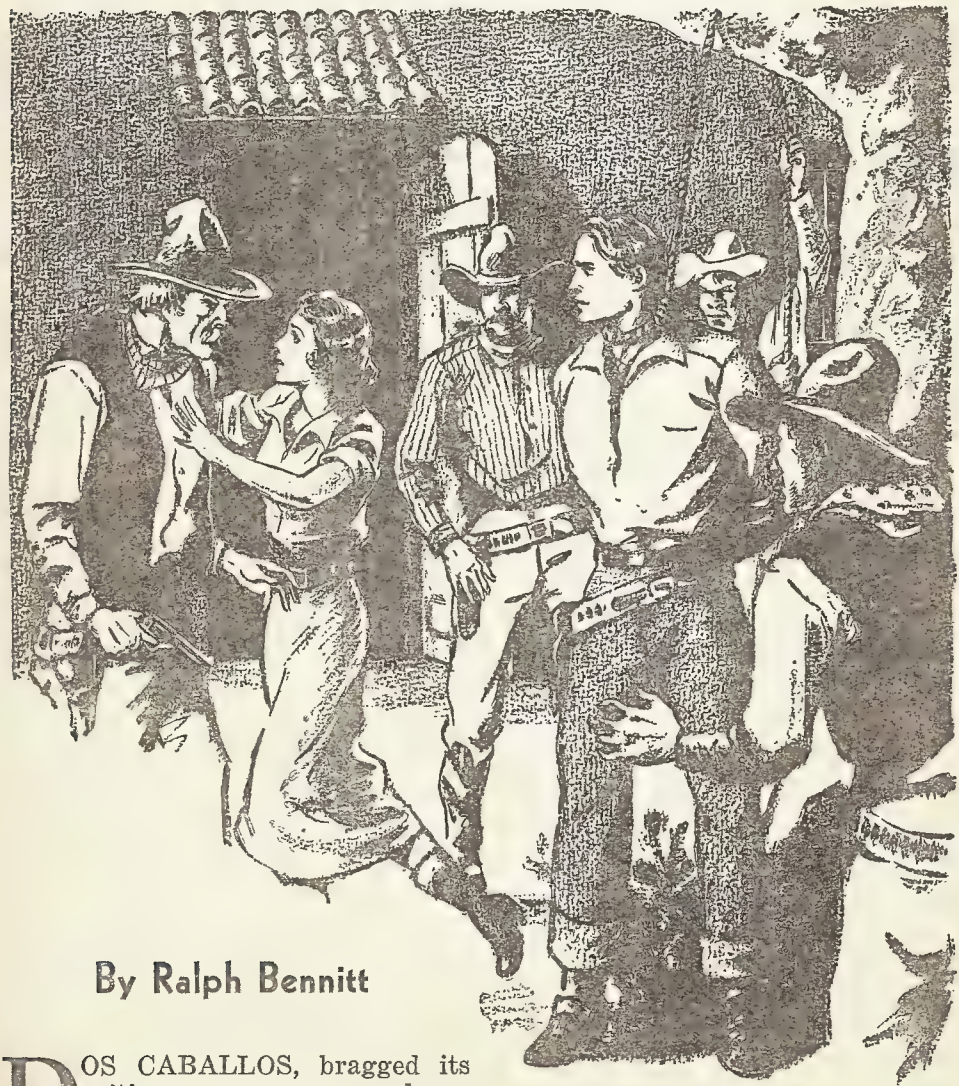


By Ralph Bennitt

An old lobo had taught Curt Tennys every trick of the owl-hoot. But in a ranger reckoning Tennys learned that lawman logic meant more than six-gun magic.

DOS CABALLOS, bragged its citizens, was no one-horse town. Two blocks wide and three long, it straddled the Texas-New Mexico line as another claim to distinction. Otherwise, not much. But in the shimmering noonday heat and because the posse still clung uncomfortably close, it looked to Curt Tennys, like a glimpse of heaven. Or, maybe, another mirage.

Leaning forward in the kak, he strained red-rimmed eyes the moment he topped the rise where the stagecoach trail led downward to the little cowtown. It was Dos Caballos, right enough. He recognized some things although it had been three years since that time he rode through here with Dad Slocum and Bull Carney. The time they fixed up that fine hideout over in the Panhandle.

Curt remembered the way the creek bent its green band at the north and then flowed southerly along the eastern edge of the town. He recalled this neat white cottage with the whitewashed picket fence just ahead. Mostly, he knew that on the east side of the main street lay Texas—and safety!

The little gent on the big palomino flung a final glance over his shoulder. That trail, straggling west until it was lost in the hills behind him, still showed no plume of dust. A laugh, almost boyish in its exultation, came from him as he patted the palomino's shiny neck.

"You made it, feller! We're free!"

"Borrowed" from the Santa Fe prison warden, that gelding was no ordinary bronc. His long legs gave him that mile-eating trot. But it was the deep chest and the great heart which had kept him pounding during those first frantic days two weeks ago.

Those two weeks had taken their toll of the little outlaw—in a way, more than the ugly two years which had gone before. Snatches of sleep, grub a dog would only sniff at, the fear of the hunted, these had lined the little gent's face. He was just twenty-one and he looked thirty.

For the first time, he rode relaxed. Dressed in worn range garb, with his mild blue eyes and a quiet way of talking, he did not look like a man who had drawn even with three bad hombres and shot them dead. He could more easily be taken for a saddle tramp hunting new range. Only, no gun swung at his hip. Curt promised himself he'd mend that once he made it to the gang's hideout.

No more gray prison walls for him. The next time he'd go down shooting as had his father, a more famous Curt Tennys. At least, from the stories Dad Slocum had been telling for eleven years, old Curt was one of the fastest and slickest outlaws in the Southwest. Dad Slocum had spent ten years in prison, himself, and he had never gotten over the bitterness of that.

"You're gonna be just like your dad," the old outlaw boss told Curt again and again. "And how he hated the law, same's you and me. He died with his boots on, but what the hell! You and me ain't aimin' to finish up swinging from a cottonwood or cash in our last chip behind a prison wall!"

A QUEER old hellion, Dad Slocum. He always packed the Old Testament in his shirt pocket—and killed without mercy if a lawman got in his way. He believed a dead man's spirit hung around to keep an eye on his old haunts. And neither Curt nor the rest of that hard-bitten crew ever laughed at him for that.

Curt had no recollection of his mother and not much of his father. He only remembered that his father always spoke gently, carried a big gun, and was gone on long trips. A bleak look came into Curt's blue eyes as he neared the white cottage.

"I ain't nobody," he reflected. "I'm a outlaw who never stole. A gunslick without a gun—a Texan, born and raised, who don't savvy cows. And here I am with just twenty cents and a lobo's craving for grub—" The little gent halted his dismal inventory of himself because of the prettiest picture he had ever seen.

Not twenty feet away, was a girl in an old-fashioned garden pulling weeds. She straightened on hearing the plop of the gelding's hoofs in the dust and pushed a pink sunbonnet farther back on her dark wind-blown

hair. Her slender body was dressed in riding clothes; her soft cheeks were flushed. For an instant her dark brown eyes met his as if in mild inquiry, then she stooped quickly and resumed her task.

Curt felt a tingle run through him that caused his newly sunburned face to become even redder. During that moment he thought her expressive eyes revealed more than a shy interest in a stranger. Unconsciously, he halted his mount. Beyond her, at the corner of the house was a stone well with its tiny roof and tin dipper. He licked cracked lips and wondered if he could ask her for a drink. Or that old Mex down by the barn saddling a chestnut pony—

"No," he decided. "She turned away too quick. Maybe they've got the 'Man Wanted' signs posted down there and she's seen 'em."

The thought hit him like a blow. He did not try to analyze a sudden strange feeling. He only remembered that palavering with decent folks was not for him. They were on the side of the law! Swearing under his breath, he kicked the jaded palomino into a fast trot.

A man with a deputy sheriff's star on his leather vest stepped into the street as the fugitive, now almost in a panic, drove the gelding over onto the Texas side. Taut as a fiddle string, Curt reined to a walk. He put both hands on the pommel, but he was thinking fast as he neared the lawman.

From the east, four cowpokes bounced up, guns swinging at their hips. Their coming halting Curt's desperate plan of diving from the saddle, if need be, and getting the deputy's .45. Blood left his face as he watched narrowly. Three of the punchers yipped at the deputy, flung down in front of a saloon on the New Mexico side, and clattered over the board walk to the saloon door.

The fourth, a heavy-set, sour looking ranny, dismounted more slowly. He hobbled over to the middle of the street, glanced at Curt, and then stood with both fists at his hips.

"Hi-ya, Lennon, you Tejano lemon," he grunted. "Did you fellers catch them bandidos that held up the stage last week?"

Deputy Sheriff Lennon swore and turned from his eagle-eyed appraisal of the little gent. "You know dang well we didn't, Braden," he growled. "They's a ranger heading—"

Curt heard no more as the two made it for the saloon. The hard light in his eyes faded and his tight mouth became less grim. A Texas peace officer might cross his border for a drink, but not to make an arrest; the same for those rannies scouring the New Mexico countryside. Until he had extradition papers, this deputy couldn't do a thing. That was law, Dad Slocum said.

LETTING out a long breath, Curt rode on down the street, passing up one restaurant on the danger side, and into the next block. He kept wondering if Dad Slocum's gang was mixed up in that stage robbery. Hardly—stages were no good except when carrying gold. Banks were better if things are right.

There was one just ahead and almost opposite a Chinese eating place. Curt's blond brows knit as he saw a mounted man holding two horses in front of the bank on the New Mexico side. An inoffensive looking jasper, that tall skinny cowpoke. He sat with one leg resting on the neck of his big blue roan and, with a brown cigarette pasted to his lower lip, seemed half asleep.

But Curt's schooling had been different. "That's the way Dad Slocum works it," he muttered. "An innocent looking ranny—the part I was to play when I got old enough to have some savvy."

Dismounting, he passed through the door of the Chink's place in which a half dozen town men were eating along a counter. His heart beat faster as he sat on a stool near the front

where he had a fair look at the street. What if that bank *were* being held up, right now? His keen mind quickly saw the advantages.

Noon hour with few people on the street and the bank obviously closed for the hour. Near a state line for a quick and safe getaway. Danger. Hard riding. Money—all he wanted.

Curt swore to himself as he brought out the two lonesome ten cent pieces from his jeans. He'd fix that pretty soon. From now on, there'd be no more mistakes like on that last, and first, bank holdup he'd been on. If Dad Slocum hadn't been laid up with a busted leg, Bull Carney wouldn't have led that raid which had failed completely and left Curt in the grip of the law.

"And that swamper Caswell wouldn't have been killed," Curt thought moodily.

Carney's shooting the old janitor had spooked Curt's cayuse, but the law wasn't interested in that. They gave him ten years. Just by luck he had seized his chance when two of those years had crawled by. As always when he thought of Carney, Curt's eyes lit with a cold fire.

"Wal, what'll it be, bub?" asked a rough voice. Curt looked up and a burly waiter in a dirty apron hastily backed away at the expression he saw in the little gent's eyes. "We got some real nice steak," he amended, "and fried potatoes."

A grin twisted Curt's generous mouth. He was used to figuring out what a man was thinking of, and he guessed some of it as the grouchy waiter noticed that this small patron was unarmed. "Make up your mind, if you got one," he said loudly.

With two fingers Curt pushed the two dimes across the counter and said mildly: "Bring me a big glass of water and fill me up as far as this will go."

Another patron snickered and the waiter flushed. "Cripes!" he snorted. "What's the good comin' in here with a couple thins?"

"I'll have a bowl of soup and a fried egg sandwich," Curt said after a glance at the fly-specked menu on the wall. "Judas! That smells like real apple pie!"

SUN WUN LEE, the aged proprietor, was just going past bearing two fresh pies which he set on a shelf. He glanced out the window and then turned, rubbing his skinny yellow hands. "You likeum apple pie?" he asked with a beaming smile.

Curt shook his head although the savory odor was almost overpowering. In prison, you only remember such things. "Nope, John," he said, "pie makes me sick."

"You no foolee me," murmured Sun Wun Lee, cutting a thick wedge. His black Oriental eyes watched not unsympathetically as his famished guest began scoffing up the soup. He set the smoking piece of pie in front of Curt and then went to the window.

The grouchy waiter lingered in the kitchen doorway with only half an eye to the egg he was frying. Curt turned from watching him and was about to protest on noticing the pie when Sun Wun Lee pointed a crooked forefinger at the window and beamed again.

"You likee p'etty gal, too, huh? Allee samee Missee Bess Daley."

Curt Tennys hastily set down his soup spoon. That pretty girl he had seen in the garden was galloping up to the bank on her chestnut pony, a package under one arm.

The sleepy hombre on the blue roan watched her with indifference as she walked to the door of the bank. The shade was drawn over the door glass, but someone opened quickly at her knock and she vanished suddenly. So suddenly, Curt thought she had been jerked in.

"Say!" He slid off the stool as the ranny across the way lifted a gun from his holster and blew dust from the cylinder. "You got a gun, John? Any kind of a gun?"

"Me got numbah one six-gun upstairs. What fo' you need?"

"That bank's being robbed or I'm a sheepherder!" Curt's eyes were blazing. He didn't give a hoot about the bank, but that attractive innocent girl was in danger. Whirling, he looked disgustedly at the town men. Not one wore a gun.

"Me got big gun here," exclaimed the Chink. Reaching beneath the counter, he brought out a double-barreled shotgun.

The waiter barged around the end of the counter as Curt seized the terrible weapon. He put himself in front of the door. "Listen, runt," he said hoarsely, "you can't go out. That gun's empty. Go on back and finish your dinner!"

A scrap of Dad Slocum's sage counsel flashed through Curt's mind. "I allus plant one of the gang near if I can—"

Breaking open the riot gun, Curt found it empty as the waiter had said. "You took out the shells, huh?" he accused, low-voiced. "Well, get outa my way before I beat your brains out!"

The waiter's arms shot upward to protect his head and Curt jabbed him in the stomach. He doubled over with a *whoosh!* of pain and Curt shoved him aside. He went through the door and was ducking under the hitchrail before the ranny across the street saw him. The skinny man stabbed for leather.

"Reach, hombre," Curt rasped, "'fore this thing goes off. Then spook them cayuses and ride over here."

Face paling at the menace of that terrible weapon, the tall ranny halted his gunward move. His hands went up as Curt stalked closer. "I ain't got no money, feller. If'n you wanta hold up somebody, why'n hell don't you try the bank?"

A bare minute had elapsed since Bess Daley had disappeared within the bank, and doubt shook the little gent as he stopped short of the state line in the center of the street. He might be wrong.

"Ne'mind the palaver. Spook them hosses—"

A woman's scream sounded from inside the bank. There was a shot quickly following, then a second. Curt snarled an oath. "Toss them guns over here," he bawled at the man who was milling around with the two extra horses.

The girl's voice rose again in a wail of anguish just as the bank door burst open. Two men raced out, two whom Curt recognized instantly—Dad Slocum and Bull Carney! Both carried loaded canvas bags.

"Dad!" That single word tore from Curt's throat as he stood frozen in his tracks.

"Watch 'im, boys!" sang the lookout. Bending low, the tall ranny fired at the lone man in the middle of the street. The bullet whistled past Curt's ear without harm only because the blue roan reared in excitement.

CURT barely noticed. He felt as if the ground were being swept beneath his feet as the fierce-eyed old-timer swung into the saddle. Bull Carney, black-bearded, ferocious, and looking twice as big as Curt remembered, had already mounted. His gun came down, but a shout came from Dad Slocum.

"Don't shoot! It's Curt. By mighty, Curt Tennys escaped from prison! Grab a hoss and let's go!"

Carney swore as he saw the little gent's indecision. "Fork leather if you're comin'," he rumbled. "You, Glick, watch that Chink upstairs!" The big outlaw took a snap shot at an old fellow huddled in a doorway nearby and then emptied one gun at men who were runing into the street, farther away. For a moment, as frightened citizens fled for cover, all was still.

Glick's gun broke the silence and Curt, glancing around, saw Sun Wun Lee fold up out of sight. A Chink—just a funny little old foreigner, but

he had a heart as big as a barrel. Pay or no pay, Sun Wun Lee had wanted the little gent to have a slab of that pie. Fury mounted within Curt, the frozen kind in which he would have shot the outlaw out of hand, had he had a gun.

"I ain't comin'," he said, low-voiced, but vibrant with a strange new feeling. "Caswell was killed just like Glick shot that Chink. I got blamed for it and you polecats didn't lift a finger to help me. Damn you, you can all rot—"

"I was laid up," Dad Slocum mumbled. "You know that."

Carney gave a high cackling laugh, one which had always grated on Curt. "C'mon, you'll git your divvy, eh, Dad?"

"Shore," Slocum yelled. They were edging away as firing commenced up the street. "That was a good un, Curt, makin' off you aimed to stop us. Fork your bronc. We got to fog it."

"To hell with you!" Curt shouted as the three clattered away.

He didn't blame them for fanning it. Lead was whistling mighty promiscuously now and several slugs slapped dust near his feet. He looked longingly at the jaded palomino as common sense urged him to flee. "They can't do anything," he told himself. "Anyhow, my bronc's about beat." But he knew within himself those were not the true reasons for his staying.

It was an enraged citizenry which surged up a moment later. And the eyes of all men grew cold and bitter when two men came out of the bank. One was Braden, the rancher.

"They got forty thousand," he announced. "Miles Daley's dead. Got it in the heart, plumb. Bess says it was the big un with the beard. The pore kid's just fainted."

"You got a riot gun, feller," someone said to Curt. "Why in tarnation didn't you give 'em a taste of it?"

"I'll tell you why." The husky waiter pushed forward before Curt Tennys could think up a good answer. "He didn't shoot because it's empty. What's more, he knowed it when he run out here." A malevolent grin spread over the waiter's face as a buzz of admiration ran through the crowd. "But he ain't no hero, fellers. He done it because he's one of them desperadoes. They called 'im by name —offered to divvy with 'im."

"That right, stranger?" Deputy Sheriff Lennon didn't look happy as he confronted the coldly furious little gent, since he had expressed his admiration for the little man's nerve while running up. "What this loudmouth Drew says, sounds peculiar to me. Did you know your scattergun was empty, shore nuff?"

Curt nodded. A lingering loyalty to Dad Slocum who had raised him because of some strange quirk in his warped soul, told Curt to protect the old outlaw.

"It looks now like a dumb fool play," he admitted sheepishly. "I didn't even know for sure that bank was gonna be held up until the ranny in front with the hosses blew out his gun as if he was getting ready to use it. I thought I saw Miss Daley yanked inside and, well, I—I just tried a windy, is all."

LENNON and several in the crowd nodded in understanding, but the old pilgrim who had huddled in the doorway put in an oar. "Drew shore spoke the truth, men," he said. "One o' them jaspers dang near salivated me in that doorway, yonder, and scairt the livin' jeepers outa me. I come to, though, putty soon and heard 'em offer to divvy with 'im if he'd go along. They call 'im Curt Tennys, and I just now recollected Curt Tennys is a outlaw who was sent to prison about two years ago for murder."

"If you jaspers heard so dang much," Curt said, stiff-lipped, as the crowd started, "then you all musta heard me tell 'em to go to hell."

"You've done put a noose around your own neck, feller," said Braden.

He had been crowding the deputy and now he suddenly lifted Lennon's gun. "You stay outa this, Lennon. I reckon we can handle things, eh, boys?"

A shout went up that chilled Curt's blood, the deep angry hum of a mob which lacks only a leader to carry out its horrid work. As the men surged forward, then back, Curt felt a prodding in his back. He turned, fists clenched. But it was Sun Wun Lee and he thrust out a paper sack.

"You fo'get pie," he chattered. "You catch 'em quick—"

"Get the hell away from here, you damn Chinaman!" yelled Braden as Curt felt hardness within the sack. "He ain't gonna want pie where he's goin'. Get a rope—I'll take that pie."

"Back up!" It came from the little gent like the lash of a bull whip. Ripping off the paper, he clutched a Frontier model Colt. There was a heartening feel in the balance of that gun which brought him new life. His compact body lax, he dropped into a crouch while the big .45 made small arcs near his middle.

"Don't try anything, boys," he warned after the first gasps died. No one moved. There was a bitter determination in the chill blue of those eyes which seemed to hold them. They knew they were looking at a man completely unafraid. "You fellers could take me, mebbe, but I'll get two-three while you're doin' it. And you, Braden, will be the first. Get them dew claws up!"

Curt could see Bess Daley in the door of the bank as he backed cautiously toward the palomino. He felt a sudden crushing desire to have her know the truth. "I didn't have a thing to do with this holdup and I don't care a hang whether you believe it or not. But if I was you fellers and was honin' to hang somebody for shooting Daley, I'd fork a cayuse—"

"No!" came suddenly, shrilly from Bess. "Look out!"

Curt whirled as her hands involuntarily jerked upward. He turned just in time to catch a rock the size of his fist on his forehead. Lights rocketed out during an instantaneous tick of time in which he saw Drew's grinning face. He sensed rather than saw the mob rushing in as blackness hit him.

Muffled and distant sounded voices which were actually close when he came to. His eyes were blindfolded and he realized with an icy chill that his hands were tied behind him; that he sat in his own saddle. A harsh feeling around his neck told all too plainly of the rope which probably already ran up over some limb.

"Hustle it up," croaked one man. "They's hossbackers comin' hell for leather from town. Mebbe it's that Texas Ranger we heard was comin'."

"This durn tree would be in Texas," wailed another.

"It's shore nuff over the line," came from a third. "Fellers, we ain't actually got any proof. I'm gittin' out." There was a sudden pounding of horse hoofs and creaking of leather as some of the nervous would-be lynchers left. Not all—Curt could hear their heavy breathing.

He held his own during that awful moment in which doubt assailed the remaining few. Sweat oozed out on his forehead and somebody laughed coarsely.

"He's guilty as hell," said a rough voice which Curt knew belonged to Drew, the waiter. "Damn chickenhearts. Here, I'll spook the cayuse."

Faint, far away—so terribly far away—sounded a voice. "Wait! Oh, wait!" It was Bess Daley.

Curt knew it would be she. He wondered why she had delayed even as he heard the terrible swish of the quirt. Leather slapped on horseflesh with the finality of doom. He felt a sudden soul-shriveling jerk at his throat. Through a red haze that was no part of daylight his starting eyes burned with a living fire.

Over the cantle, then the gelding's rump as the sound of horse hoofs receded. He hung choked, gasping for the life-giving air which would not

come. His insides were being pulled apart. He had one last bitter thought: "What a way to die!"

BUT he did not die. He came to once more with a sloshing of water on face and chest. He opened his eyes with a shudder, but for a space things swam. Four persons were watching him, then two when his eyes focused. A man and a girl. A lean tall gent with "ranger" written all over him in the calm competence of his wind-burned face.

The girl—the one he had last seen at the bank. Curt could not remember her name, but he felt a rush of thankfulness toward her for saving him. Her face was puckered with anxiety, her dark eyes wide.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Curt nodded at her breathless question and slumped against the tree trunk, feeling of his neck. "I could stand a drink of water," he said thickly.

Bess Daley ran down toward the creek. Odd that the man did not go. He said something in a low tone and the girl fled on light feet. The ranger stood there, spraddle-legged, looking down. Little crow's-feet played about his gray eyes, but he wasn't smiling.

"Reckon we got here just in time, Mister," he said in a soft drawl. "A few more seconds and that lass rope'd have led you straight to hell. No, never mind talkin', Tennys. I'm Dawson with the rangers. Wanta say something 'fore Miss Daley gets back."

"You got extradition papers already, eh?"

"Not yet, though I reckon we'll have 'em directly—mebbe three-four days. However, mebbe we can make a deal. This Slocum gang has a hideout somewhere here in the Panhandle. We could never locate it. Knowin' you rode with 'em once, thought mebbe you'd show me the place if I let you go scot-free."

"Not me. If you savvy that much about me you oughta know I wouldn't lead the law up to 'em. Old Dad Slocum raised me from a kid. A salty old gallywumpus, but he stood by me. Taught me to ride and shoot and plenty more."

"I've heard tell about the shootin'." A faint smile curled the ranger's big mouth. "But he deliberately put you on the owlhoot trail and you don't owe him much for that. Nor Bull Carney, either. I guess you didn't know Glick, and so far I ain't sure about the fourth member."

Drew, the waiter, of course. But Curt said nothing about that.

"What happened to the Chink?" he asked. "First, I thought Glick shot 'im, then he comes out and tries to help me 'cause he figgered I was hungry. But if you think Sun Wun Lee is in with them scamps, you're plumb mistaken."

Dawson laughed. "Course not. I've known Sun Wun Lee for years. Told Lennon to put 'im in jail until them idjits yonder cool off." The ranger went on, his voice soft but with a quality of steel in it.

"I know more about you than you think, Tennys. You're a Texan, and I know about your dad, too. He was drowned crossin' a river and Slocum took you away from a Mex. You aim to follow in old Curt's footsteps, or not?"

"I'm twenty-one," Curt said.

"Old enough to know black from white. I'm spreadin' out the cards, feller—I'm givin' you a chance."

"Well, I ain't sellin'—not at your price. What you want Dad Slocum for? He didn't pull this job in Texas. He always steered clear o' Texas. You can't arrest him. He—" Curt faltered as for the first time he saw the old lobo in a new light.

DAWSON'S mouth tightened. "The gang sloped over into Texas on their last job without meanin' to, mebbe. Held up a stage and killed the driver. That's how come I read up on the records of the Slocum gang. You're in it here and there, but

you got a clean bill except for that Caswell killin'. Figgered it was the fust time Slocum let you go along."

Curt was astounded at the way in which the law kept track of badmen. "I killed three men," he said harshly. "Did you law jaspers know about them, too?"

"Yep. Rannies who deviled a small young feller about packin' such a big hogleg. They drawed first—" Dawson shrugged, said in an altered tone: "Shore glad we got here in time."

Light feet sounded, then Bess was there with her hat full of water. Her soft cheeks flushed as she held out the water. "I'm sorry I took so long. Mr. Dawson was quicker. He cut you down and rode for the creek and was back in no time."

"Thanks, ma'am, thanks to both of you." Curt's eyes met the girl's dark ones and he felt a tug of pity as he read the pain in hers. He drank greedily, cleared his throat. "I'm mighty sorry about—things. Was it your dad that Carney shot down?"

Bess' eyes flashed. One small hand holding her riding quirt whitened at the knuckles. "It was the big man with the black beard. He grabbed me when I knocked, jerked me inside and clapped his dirty hand over my mouth. He held me while the white-haired man scooped up all the money. I bit Carney's hand the first chance I got and he swore and woke dad. Poor dad! Half asleep when he came out of his office. Didn't even have a gun!"

Curt tore away his gaze to find the ranger looking down at him with bleak eyes. In silence, the two men stared at each other while the stricken girl sobbed softly. The little gent nodded, came to his feet, unconsciously hitching a gunbelt that wasn't there.

Shyly, he held out his hand to the girl. "It won't do you any good, Miss Daley, but I aim to go out and cut down that lobo. *Adios*, and thanks for everything."

Bess' four fingers covered her mouth, her tear-dimmed eyes wide. "You mean you're going—alone?"

"Sure." Curt swallowed and studied the toe of one boot. He knew he had to get out the next words and they were not easy to say. "I'm goin' alone," he said roughly, "because I ain't a lawman and never will be. I busted out of prison—the law's after me." His voice was hoarse now because the girl's face had grown pale, but he plunged on—"I don't want the law with me. I'm gonna get Carney, but I won't lead the law onto Dad. S'long."

A faint sound came from the girl as he mounted the big gelding, but Curt cantered away without a backward look. East, into the badlands of the Panhandle.

THE ranger caught up with him in a gully before Curt had gone ten miles. The little gent drew rein and he did not try to keep the bitterness from his voice as Dawson came up.

"Follerin' me, huh? I thought I made it plenty plain this was my play."

Dawson flung a leg across his horse's neck and began building himself a smoke. "I'm only goin' this far," he drawled. "Brought you a little grub and this shootin' iron. Want 'em?"

Curt's stomach turned at the mere mention of food, but he could not forget the ranger's proposition. "I told you I don't want anything at the price, Dawson. I play it my way or not at all."

"Uh-huh." For a whole minute, silence held in the narrow gully. The sun was beginning to get low and a lonesome coyote began yowling its weird call from a distant cliff. The ranger inhaled smoke and let it out in a quiet chuckle. "I reckon you're like your dad, your real one. Anyhow, I'd shore hate to have you for an enemy, Tennys."

"That goes double, feller." But Curt knew the big ranger was driv-

ing at something. Guessing it, he felt his chest tighten. "Spill it," he said gruffly.

"Hungry as yonder coyote," Dawson mused half aloud. "No gun, yet he figgers he'll wade in and whip Bull Carney! You dang thick-head, I'd just like to shake hands with a gent who's *all* man!"

Their hands met in a hard clasp. And somehow Curt Tennys knew that the bad years were all behind. He wanted to lie down and howl, but he dismounted instead, sat down and laughed. "Where at's that grub you was braggin' about? And if you didn't bring a hunk of the Chink's apple pie, I'll murder you, shore nuff."

At dawn, Curt was again riding east. Alone. Confident that Dawson would keep his word and not follow, he rode as directly as the rough country would permit. His heart was buoyant and he had laughed at the lawman's gloomy judgment on Curt's simple plan of breaking up the gang.

"Dunno about Slocum," Dawson advised, "but just give Carney and Glick the same chance you would a rattler in July."

The sun had not yet set, but it was dark and gloomy at the bottom of the box canyon when Curt neared its head. Watered by a spring higher up, it was grassy in that narrow gorge. Curt's gaze swept the shadowed cliff on the west side. There was a secret trail on that face just wide enough for a man on foot. It was a last resort, only—a getaway without horses which could be defended.

Curt felt a little guilty about revealing that much of Dad's hideout to the ranger. "All right," he had agreed at last. "I'm busting up Dad's game for good. He's gettin' too old, anyhow. Give 'im two days and then come on. You'll find either me or Bull Carney. Maybe Glick."

As he expected, the place was guarded. From behind a boulder where the gorge narrowed to a dozen yards, Glick rose up with a carbine at his shoulder. "It's Tennys, huh? If it had been a mite darker I'd have plugged you and no questions asked. Reckon I oughta anyhow for doin' what you done back there."

"Mebbe you ought," Curt agreed mildly, though there was steel in his glance. "Ever see a man draw and kill another who had the drop, Glick?"

"I ain't yet." But the outlaw was shaken. "And if you've brought the law, you'll never see no such miracles."

There was a smooth blur of motion too swift for Glick's eye to follow. A short step sidewise by the little gent, then the outlaw was staring in astonishment at Curt's Colt. The carbine still pointed, but it aimed a foot off its target.

"It's no miracle," Curt Tennys said. "I think I'll just gut-shoot you right now for that talk about the law."

"Cripes!" Pale, shaken, Glick let the carbine fall.

"Put it away, kid," said Dad Slocum. He came from behind a bush, hand out and face beaming. "By mighty, you're a sight for sore eyes, Curt!" His voice rang with pride. "I told this dumb-head about your draw and he wouldn't believe it. Now, you fellers fergit it and be friends. Friends, savvy?"

Curt nodded, but did not offer to shake hands. He walked along beside Dad swearing inwardly at the old man's interference. One minute more and he'd have had that carbine fixed so it would harm no one. Now, with Glick back there his plan looked harder.

ACTING as tickled as if Curt were his own long lost son, Dad Slocum led the way to the cave. A strange idea—that the old lobo had purposely identified him as a long-rider back in Dos Caballos, faded from the little gent's mind.

No, Dad seemed almost relieved to see him. Perhaps the hold he always kept over the tight little gang was

slipping. He was a lot older. His joints were stiff and he peered about as if his eyesight were bad. He still carried that little Bible in his shirt pocket over his heart. With an inward start, Curt wondered for the first time if Slocum had a fancy the book would shield a vital spot.

Bull Carney ambled out of the cave wearing both guns on crossed belts. His hands hovered near the butts when he made out the visitor. "You, eh?" he said. "What'd you come for?"

Slocum said cheerily: "Been talkin' about the li'l worry wart all day, ain't we, Bull?"

This talk did not fool Curt Tennys. He sized up the way things stood just from the attitude of these two. Bull wanted to drag down the old wolf from his leadership. He had last seen this whelp as a youngster to be led. Now the whelp was full grown, a rival to be reckoned with.

Curt accepted the cards as dealt and figured his play to suit.

At Slocum's question, Bull gave his cackling laugh that set Curt's nerves to jangling. "Yeh, we talked about you. I figgered you'd be gallows meat by sundown yesterday."

"You hoped I would," Curt amended softly. "Keep your dew claws in front, Carney. Or draw, you snake. Your time's about up."

"Ah, keep your hair on." Carney's black brows knit, but he managed a sickly grin. He stalled because he wasn't ready and the little gent knew it. Backing sidewise, the big outlaw stood facing the two and out of line from Glick. "What's eatin' you, Curt? We wanted you to ride with us, didn't we? You still git your divvy —we'll vote on it. Glick, come up here!"

But Glick did not move. Curt felt a spot begin to burn at the middle of his back where a bullet from Glick's carbine would strike first. He was in a bad position and so was Dad Slocum, who was a little beyond Carney, but in the line between Curt and Glick. The light was bad, too, and half-turned as Carney was, he might already have drawn his right-hand gun.

He could get away with it if Dad's eyes were that bad for near objects. As Carney finished speaking, he dropped his right shoulder a trifle. The moment had come.

"Get behind him, Dad," Curt said in an ordinary voice. "And get Glick before he gets you!"

Curt was already springing to the right, twisting as he stabbed leather. He had guessed it. Carney had filled his hand. He swung it forward with that fractional second of advantage he needed to beat Curt's lightning-like draw. Flame and smoke belched from the big outlaw's .45 in a cross-body shot.

The slug smoked across the front ribs of the little gent like a white-hot running iron. His own gun bucked, smashed lead into Carney's left arm, spoiling Bull's quick shot at Slocum.

"Take 'em, Glick!" bellowed Carney, leaping backward. His right gun poured lead at the slight figure of the man he hated.

Curt's second shot blended with the big outlaw's. He felt a stunning blow high on his right arm that spun him half about and probably saved him from Glick's first shot. Half blinded by pain, he dived for his fallen gun, groping with his left hand, while every muscle jerked in expectation of Carney's next bullet.

TIME stood still during that moment. He had heard Dad let out a hoarse shout at the beginning. From the tail of his eye, he had seen the old lobo triggering fast toward Glick's shadowy figure. He stopped firing now as Curt came to his knees. And he was hurt bad. Blood streamed from his mouth as his rheumy eyes made out his adopted son.

"Down, Curt. Glick—"

Curt flattened. Slocum's big Colt leveled once more, and though the effort must have been tremendous, he squeezed trigger. Glick gave a choked

yell and then there was silence down there.

Bull Carney's laugh rang out, high, almost maniacal. He had seen Curt's gun fall; obviously knew that Dad Slocum's gun was empty. Toeing Curt's gun off into the brush, he turned on his old leader with cruel deliberation and held his Colt about a foot from Slocum's white head.

"What about that fast draw now, you pizenous, psalm-singin' old coot?" he jeered. "The draw you taught 'im and bragged about. I'm gonna let you have it in the head and then finish him."

Dropping his useless Colt, Dad Slocum stared upward with his fierce old eyes. Bull was hurt, bad. He stood there, feet wide apart and swaying. Curt knew his bullet had struck near he big outlaw's heart, but Carney ad the strength of a bull and his hate kept him up. He was holding the trigger back, his thumb on the hammer. Even a little shock would release that hammer and bring death to the old outlaw.

"Finish me now, you skunk," Curt croaked. His hand had closed on a stone. His breath came in jerks as he steadied himself to throw it, if Carney would only turn. "You'll be dead in a minute, Carney. My slug went pretty close to where it was supposed to."

"I'm dead already," Carney said, and again his cackling laugh rang out. "In a minute we'll all be in hell. The hull Slocum gang!"

"That's right," Curt breathed. "You shot old Daley when he didn't have a gun on 'im. You're real good at that. But before you put out our lights, let's hear you admit you shot Caswell the same way and then spooked my bronc so the law would catch me. We're all gonna die. Speak up!"

Bull Carney swayed, swallowed as if it were an effort for him to speak. "Shore, I done it," he said finally. "Boss' orders."

"That's a lie!" Curt gripped the stone, hard.

"Is it? Ask him, and you better hustle. Ain't much time for any of us. 'Specially you, wart. You can put that rock down, too. I can rip you to pieces before you even start." Bull kicked Slocum in the ribs. "Just to make you feel real good, you old lobo, I'm gonna spill the truth."

Dad Slocum writhed on the grass. And then, suddenly, his right hand swung forward. Orange flame spat on a slanting line upward. Curt could almost hear the slug strike Bull Carney's forehead. The big fellow caved suddenly at the knees and crashed to the ground like a sack of feed.

"He never knowed about that hideout gun," Slocum whispered. "Glick got me in the right lung. Smart. He figgered why I allus carried the Testament in my shirt pocket. I'm a old hypocrite—"

"Take it easy, Dad. Lie flat." Curt felt where the old outlaw was hurt and knew he could do nothing. Feebly, Dad Slocum pushed away Curt's hand. Hunkered down, waiting for the end, Curt listened to the night sounds. They seemed unusually loud. But he was in pain, himself, and he wondered if it were his head. Some of it, though, came from the old man's labored breathing.

"I'M GOIN', Curt, so listen close. You've allus been a good li'l shaver and more'n once I nigh broke away from my plan I made when I took you from the Mex."

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"I had a feelin' you'd come back tonight, and I meant to spill it m'self. Wal, I brung you up meanin' to make you pay 'cause I couldn't git back at your real dad. I couldn't 'cause he was drownded before I could get outa prison an' kill 'im. 'A eye for a eye,' the Bible says, an' I believed it. And I knowed your dad would be hanging around and watchin' me git back at 'im. So I brung you up to ride the owlhoot trail—"

"I don't savvy," Curt broke in savagely. "Many's the time you've told me what a hell-roarin' outlaw my dad was. Now Bull says you gave 'im orders to let me get caught. Is that so?"

"It's so." Blood ran out the corners of the old lobo's mouth as his voice wandered on a faraway note. "I'll be meetin' up with Curt Tennys pretty quick. Wonder if he'll send me to a prison down in hell."

Curt clutched the old-timer's wrist. "Talk, Dad. My language. What you mean?"

"Curt Tennys wa'n't no outlaw, kid. He was a Texas Ranger. A rootin' tootin' hell-raisin' lawman. I kept you away from towns so you wouldn't learn different. Caught me runnin' wet cows. He sent me to prison—'cause I'd killed a Mex accidental. A Mex! I swore I'd git even for that. Well—" With a sigh, the old lobo stiffened once and lay still.

Stunned, Curt sat still as a stone for an entire minute. A strange gladness welled up within him to learn the truth about his father, yet the feeling was tinged with dismal thoughts of his own case. Caswell had been killed. He, Curt, was still a hunted man—always would be—with no earthly way of clearing himself now.

"Curt!" The word was said so softly he wasn't sure but that it was a louder stirring of the night breeze.

The little gent turned his head as two figures emerged from the deeper shadows of the bushes. It was Dawson and Bess Daley.

Dawson spoke slowly, carefully. "She was bound she'd come, old-timer, and I had to. So did she. We forgot Carney shot her dad, you know."

"He made me promise not to interfere," Bess put in when Curt remained silent. "We weren't to do anything unless things got too hot for you alone, he said. We got here first by coming down that footpath. Curt, I thought I'd have to shoot when Carney said he could kill you before you could throw that stone."

"He kicked my gun away," Curt explained tonelessly. Not that it made any difference. Suddenly, the full import of her words crashed into his mind. "You—you must have been close then. Jupiter! Did you hear Carney admit he'd killed Caswell?"

"Shore did, Tennys," Dawson laughed. "And glad of it. I never put much stock in that New Mexico trial, nohow, but I can clear you now. I didn't know, though, you thought your old dad was a dang outlaw."

"Bess, did you hear that?" Curt almost sang it, but his elation quickly subsided. "I'm a dang outlaw until I return this hoss I stole. And they won't forget right away I jumped prison and led a posse over about half of New Mexico."

Something in the little hombre's voice set the girl's chin to wobbling, but in the gloom he couldn't be sure.

"No, Curt, you've paid already," she said gently. "And what you did today puts New Mexico in debt to you. You could come back if—when you want to, I know."

"Not," Dawson chuckled, "without permission." He drew out a paper which proved, when he lit a match, to be a telegram. "You didn't know it, Tennys, but you was sort of fightin' with the rangers when you waded in here. Couldn't have you in no more killings that wasn't plumb legal, savvy?"

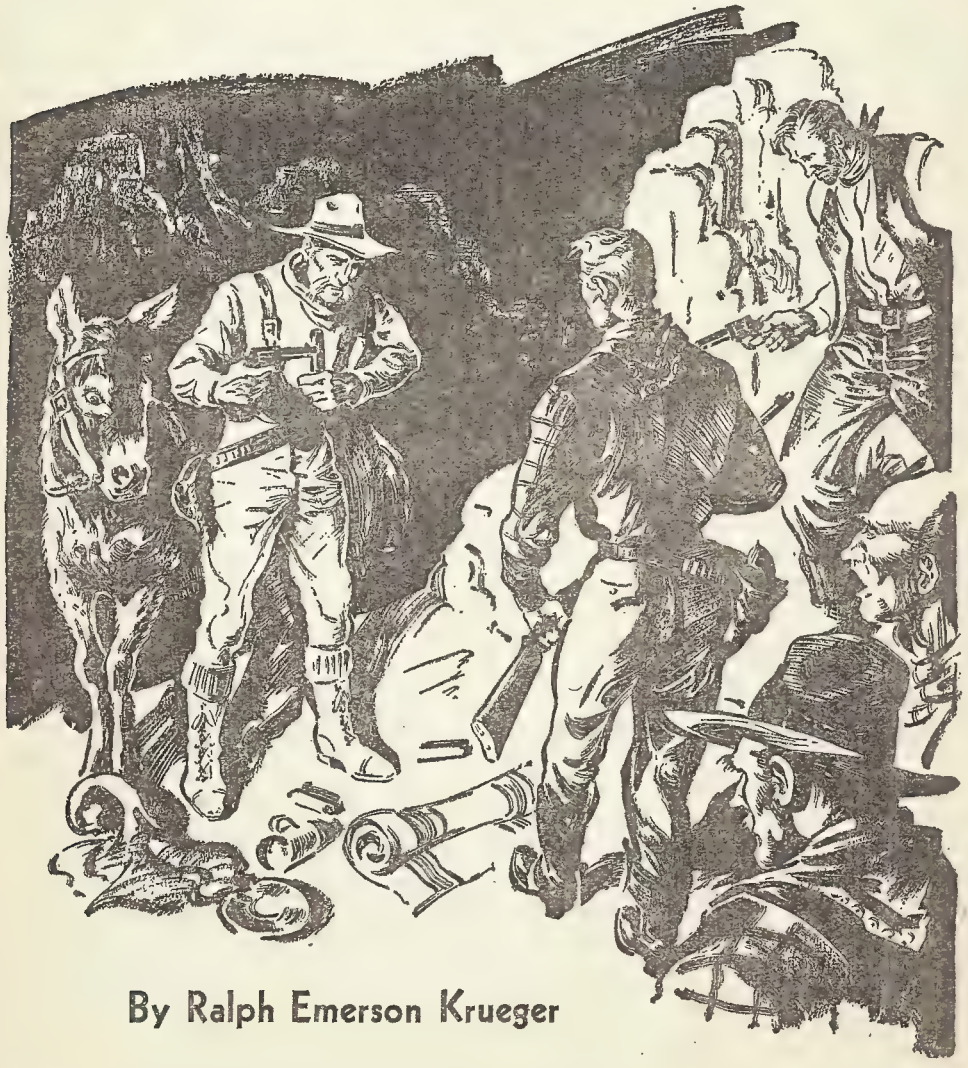
"Me with the law? What in h—What you mean?"

After we parted, "I went back to town to nail that waiter, Drew. Figgered 'im right too. He'll go up for five-ten years. While I was at it, I wired Cap to authorize me to put you on, temporary-like, ontil he could get a look at you and swear you in. The answer came immediate. He said: 'Yes, put him on. Of course, any Curt Tennys belongs with the rangers.'"

Curt was seeing through a mist. He reached out and touched a warm soft hand which quickly answered his own squeeze.

Deputy Larry McGill had a scheme to ferret out a desert killing. But even this law-hound was no match for . . .

Hot-Trail Treachery



By Ralph Emerson Krueger

SIX men traveled south into Diablo Sink where the sun was a curtain of flame. Heat waves curled over the vast wastelands like tiny columns of smoke. Lead-heavy boots burned into the alkali dust. Six pairs of them. All but one pair lifted slowly, fell slowly, rhythmically.

If young Larry McGill's boots lifted and fell a little out of tune with the others, it was because "that's the way his Uncle Ozzy woulda done it." They'd named a desert town up in Nevada after his old sheriff uncle, Ozzy

McGill. Great old boy, Uncle Ozzy. No desert too hot for Uncle Ozzy. No trek too long nor lawbreaker too desert-wise.

Larry McGill wasn't concerned about saving his strength. He figured he'd make it somehow. It was his chance if they'd only listen to him. Old Ozzy McGill, that famous lawman of the trail towns, still lived in the happy blue eyes of Larry McGill. Old Ozzy's walrus mustache was missing, but the methodical, cool and calculating head was reborn on young shoulders, square and wide. His Uncle Ozzy had trailed many a man into the desert and Larry McGill could show them how.

But they had heard too much of how his Uncle Ozzy woulda done it. At least, that's the way old Mooseface Pratt had put it when the heat got him a little, just before they had reached that last waterhole.

And that was no way for a sheriff to talk to his new deputy. Of course, it was true that Larry McGill had tried to make an Uncle Ozzy out of Sheriff Pratt. Larry had come up out of the West; his Uncle Ozzy McGill had long since gone back into the dust of the West. But the West does not forget its heroes.

Deputy Larry McGill slanted a short glance in the direction of the two swarthy faces at his side. He caught himself "animal reckonin' " as his Uncle Ozzy had often called it. "Reckon the breed of the critter you're dealin' with, then use the old hoss sense."

Sheriff Pratt was "Mooseface" for no reason other than fact. Unshapely head, long jaws, but almost surprisingly—no antlers. Bull horns seemed more fitting during a spell of pointless reasoning. To Larry McGill it seemed pointless for Mooseface to argue against the superstitious beliefs of the half-breed Poco between them.

Animal reckonin' would account for the mysterious disappearance of Lem Sprow. If these slopes were haunted—shaped in evil signs as the half-breed Poco had insisted—animal reckonin' would bring that out too.

But it was back to these evil slopes that Poco was guiding him and four others—to be swallowed up as Lem Sprow had been.

Animal reckonin' was not easy when it came to half-breeds. You had to decide if this one was a coyote or a sidewinder or maybe a fox. His face might suggest any or all three of them. But there were other animal likenesses to reckon with and it was easier to decide on skunk.

Larry McGill kept slogging along. A desert's mighty big and hot and dry when you're looking for a man. Your tongue can swell up. Your eyes hanker to give out, especially when you look far out to the horizon and you see only spots moving up and down like a lot of men.

As night came with its dark and purpling wave rolling over the gray desolation, the lank deputy turned more frequently to the three men flanked to the rear. Animal reckonin' made them sheep. Brothers Andy and Pete Dillon, and Hank Breen—desert-seasoned and right concerned about the fate of old Lem Sprow.

LARRY McGILL gradually let himself drop back, let the sheriff and breed prod slowly and silently ahead. It was almost time now to do what Uncle Ozzy would have done.

Pete Dillon greeted him with a muttered question: "How you savvy this breed's superstitions, Larry?"

"Superstitions hell!" cut in Hank Breen.

"Wal—I dunno," Brother Andy put in his two bits' worth. "That slant-eyed Poco shore sticks tight to his 'riginal yarn. Makes sense to me. Take f'rinstance him firin' his .44 after shoutin' out his lungs in the middle of this desert after he woke up and found Lem missin'."

"He coulda fired that .44 while Lem was sleepin'," retorted Hank.

"Let's see now," Deputy Larry McGill reviewed. "Poco claims he ob-

jected to makin' camp in them slopes, but Lem overruled him. Don't make sense. First place, Lem was a right fine cuss. Seein' as how this was only his second spell in the desert he'd be hankerin' to learn."

Larry McGill said: "The breed slept sound 'til mornin' and when he woke up his pardner's gone. No signs of a struggle. Nothin' touched and nothin' missin' but Lem. Swallered up. Huh!"

"By the devil desert," Poco claimed.

They pushed along, with the stars stabbing down at them from the ebony dome above. They went on until the sparkling rim of a waterhole marked their camp for the rest of the night. One by one, each figure spread itself out on the desert floor with the uneasy half-breed miner in the center. Larry watched the man's head turn from one to the other, figured the breed fully expected more quizzing. He looked for it, almost begging—anything to break the monotonous, accusing silence. . . .

Out of the east climbed the blood-red sun, firing its power into the bodies of the six pushing, prodding figures. Hot sands plastered their throats; the air they breathed was searing fire. They had long since dropped talk in favor of preserving their strength. Late that day they arrived at the camp in the slopes. Larry McGill took it all in at a glance.

There *was* something mighty unpleasant looking about the layout of these slopes. All around them hung a most remarkable silence, a *waiting* silence, different from anything he had ever known in the desert. It was here, the half-breed Poco had insisted, that he had last seen his pardner. And it was in these slopes that the two had met up not so many months ago, going on as pardners.

"Maybe your pardner went plumb loco and is roamin' the desert," suggested Larry McGill with drawn brows. "Maybe he's tryin' to find his way back."

"No — I look ver' careful over slopes, but he is not there. So then I leave everything like it is. There is nothing else I can do."

"Umph," grunted Mooseface Pratt.

"Here is the camp. The same like I leave it," Poco gulped. "An' the burros," he added, extending an informative arm. Two mouse-colored animals, their leather-swollen tongues hanging, pleaded for relief. "An' now you see as much as there is to see an' there is no more to tell."

Maneuvering to put the situation squarely up to the sheriff, Poco stepped away with a satisfied shrug of shoulders, seemingly giving birth to an all-conclusive air of absolution. Deputy Larry McGill promptly pounced upon this opportunity to be agreeable, overlooking the frowning disapproval of the sheriff.

"All right, men," he called. "Here's the plan. We all separate. Every man in a different direction and that means you too, Poco. No need of anyone back-trackin' to the north. Andy, you an' Pete go west and northwest. Hank, you head straight east. Stay out 'til dark."

One by one they started out on their search for the missing Lem Sprow. Mooseface and his deputy were the last to leave. They stood side by side surveying the camp. The two patient burros waited at the edge of the blanket spread on the sand. Two duffle bags lay among the personal effects of the desert miners.

Mooseface spoke: "How come you been givin' orders all along? Reckon that's how your Uncle Ozzy woulda done it?" Mooseface stood there and watched him. He smiled and it was not a nice smile. It was a smile that was new and strange to Larry McGill. It meant that an answer would be the wrong one unless it came from the wizened head of old Uncle Ozzy. So he did what he thought old Ozzy would have done. He forced a smile as near like it as possible without the aid of a big moose-jaw.

MOOSEFACE'S play had been effectively called with that mimicking drawn smile on the face of his young deputy. It left nothing for him to do but to start his trek for the missing man. But Larry McGill did not go with him. He just waited, watching the fading form of the sheriff as it disappeared beyond a slope. When he was sure that old Mooseface could not see him, he started on a trek of his own. He didn't trek far. Starting from the camp, he walked in widening circles, slowly, his eyes on the ground.

He was remembering an admonition of Uncle Ozzy's: "Pick all the berries off the close bushes afore you move on to the far ones."

The ghostlike wind which blew eternally through Diablo Sink, picked his footprints up as fast as he made them. Around and around he walked, slowly, patiently, widening out, never lifting his eyes from the sand, kicking his boots into every hump, stamping hard in the depressions. At the end of his merry-go-round trek, he stood still for a long moment, smiling.

Then he did a curious thing. He walked back to camp—a ridiculously short distance in a straight line—and studied the layout carefully. Each blanket was just so. The burros didn't matter much; they would move around anyhow. But the positions of the rucksacks, the pans, even the charred wood from the dead fire, all stamped their indelible impressions into the mind of the lanky young deputy.

Then he carefully went to work to move camp. A short distance away he reconstructed it exactly as it had been originally. Then as if by the magic of Larry's command, the hot wind of the devil desert worked deftly over the sand. Footprints and all impressions of the disturbance had soon disappeared.

Larry squatted on his heels and waited.

One by one he watched each man return. All reported the same story —no trace of old Lem Sprow.

None of them felt much like eating, especially Hank. "Damn you, Poco!" he hollered. "What in tarnation did you do with Lem?"

"Hold on, H a n k," Mooseface drawled. "When it gets light we'll start lookin' again. Get some sleep, all of you."

The stars dimmed and faded, and the desert dawn hovered quickly over the camp. Hank made the first signs of life. He sat up in a daze and pawed at his eyes.

"Andy! Hey-y, Andy!" he shouted at the top of his voice. Pulling his stocky hulk to his feet, he shouted again: "Where's Andy Dillon? Sheriff! He's gone! What in hell's happened to Andy?"

Larry McGill sat up with the rest of them, looked at Andy's empty bedroll and watched the awed expressions on each bewildered face. His gaze rested longest on Poco's creased leather features suddenly shaping a map of horror.

"The desert—these devil desert! She—she—" But the breed did not finish.

Sputtering and half growling, Hank made a leap for his throat.

"Take it easy, Hank," the sheriff ordered.

"Yeah, but look!" Hank blared. "Us comin' out here lookin' for Lem an' 'stead of findin' him, Andy disappears mysterious!"

"Took him a mornin' walk, I reckon," Larry McGill put in. "Ain't likely you believe in these slopes bein' haunted, Hank?"

"This whole layout don't feel right if you're askin' my opinion." He glared at Poco.

Larry looked too. Watching the uneasy rise and fall of the breed's narrow chest, Larry's animal reckoning told him that *there* was one man who was a whole lot more worried about the disappearance of Lem Sprow and Andy Dillon than any one of the rest of them.

The last to leave on the hunt this morning was Poco. "Come nightfall

and you be back here with the rest of them," the sheriff had ordered. "And quit that infernal shakin'."

At night they were all back and still no trace of Lem Sprow.

"We'll keep a watch tonight," the sheriff growled and his mooseface showed disturbance. "Larry, you go on first. After about two hours, wake one of us."

DURING Larry's two hours of watching, that constant, waiting silence hanging over the camp was disturbed only by a single, plaintive bray from one of the burros. Larry tugged at the sheriff's shirt collar and Mooseface sat up with a start. Larry watched him long enough to make sure that he was thoroughly awake, then dropped his head to his arms for a pillow, eyes closed.

Two hours later Mooseface whispered cautiously: "Sh-h-h, your turn, Pete."

When the black dome had faded gradually into gray Hank was again the first man to open his eyes. He scowled as he watched the half-breed tossing restlessly. The breed's deep-set, beady eyes suddenly opened in a straight line with Hank's scowl. Simultaneously, they both sat up—staring at a vacant spot left by Pete. The first to speak was Hank. The trembling Poco couldn't say a word.

"By hell, sheriff—wake up! Larry! Hey, Larry!" he shouted. "Pete's gone!"

Larry McGill rubbed his eyes and stared blankly at Mooseface Pratt.

"I swear he was all right last night when I shook him to go on watch," Mooseface stuttered. "Last thing I 'member when I fell asleep, he was sittin' there and I'm sure he was plumb awake. Why—why he even talked to me!"

"Yeah, but he didn't wake me for my watch an' I was supposed to be on next," Hank thundered.

"Umph," grunted Mooseface. "Swallered up by the desert—like the rest of them."

"These place!" Poco screamed. "I tell you—it is not safe for one more night. I will not stay here another night!"

"Reckon I'm givin' orders around here, Poco, and you're not leavin' until this thing's all straightened out. An' that goes for all of us," Mooseface barked grimly. "Now each one of us'll spread out over these slopes an' desert while it's light. An' I want every man back here by dark—*you* in particular, Poco."

Under the broiling desert sun four men hunted three. Hank and Mooseface obviously were baffled. The greasy Poco remained in the grip of blind, unreasoning, superstitious fear. Larry McGill felt that he was the only one in complete possession of his faculties. That's the way his Uncle Ozzy would've felt.

All combined their efforts fighting hot, driving gusts from the south. The relentless gusts, whipping sheets of alkali, drove four men into camp at night. The reflected heat from the burning slopes struck upwards almost as intensely as the sun's rays struck down. Down on four men in a desert camp. The dust seemed to arrange itself in layers, varying in density. And if this were true, it partly explained the reason for the distortion of mirages—and to the trembling Poco—a devil desert. But Poco was not alone in his thoughts of haunted slopes. Straight at Hank he glared, expecting now some word of support for his superstitions. But Hank remained speechless.

Darkness descended. When Poco, alternately stiff, then trembling, was assigned on watch in place of Pete, his trembling ceased. He stared out into the darkness and there came a new and visible terror—surging waves greenish, vapory light. The terror was too strong, even for the cool, calculating gaze of the lanky deputy. They all stood rigidly for several moments until Hank masked his inner feelings with words.

Swinging around to Mooseface, he said: "Sheriff, do you—do you think we can trust this shakin' sidewinder to stand a watch?"

"The watch'll be just like I said. Me, first two hours—you, Larry, take the next two. Then you wake him—" he jerked his thumb toward the *mestizo* Poco—"an' he takes two hours sittin' up, an' I'm sayin' he's gotta stay awake. When his time's up, he wakes Hank. Then Hank finishes off 'til daylight."

Through the faint slit of one eye, Larry McGill saw Mooseface sitting with square knees drawn up to support folded arms as he chewed on a dust-loaded stogie. Larry went to sleep. But almost immediately, it seemed, he felt the sheriff's bony knuckles tapping him on the arm.

"Your turn," Mooseface let out softly. "Shake the breed when it's his turn."

LARRY McGILL sat up. The next two hours would be his, watching, waiting — waiting for something to happen while watching three men sleep. He nodded once to Mooseface to indicate that he was wide awake and ready to protect the camp from whatever demon might make its visit that night.

Mooseface finally got his stogie lit. He fell back on a supporting elbow, eyes half open. Larry McGill made

uneasy twists and turns with his head. Now and again he would stop to strain his eyes out into the black backgrounds of the slopes.

The wind had slackened, but the air was still thick and hot from drifting clouds of dust and sand. Larry watched the shifting of the sands as far as he could see. He had just about convinced himself that there was nothing but sand within his range of vision when suddenly a spark, no longer than the light of a firefly, completed an arc across his line of vision.

Larry gasped. When he tried to close his mouth, his teeth hammered. The arc was the result of the sheriff's discarded stogie butt. Larry stole a glance toward Mooseface and breathed more easily when he noticed that the sheriff's eyes appeared to be closed.

Finally, his two-hour vigil ended. He was about to wake the next man when eyelids slowly lifted, revealing the wide-awake stare of the *mestizo*.

"You're next," snorted Larry McGill scarcely above a whisper. "And you better not shut an eye 'til it's Hank's turn."

"I sit here all time with .44 in these hand. When I sleep I let Hank hold it while he watch," he replied eagerly. His vibrating right, bony little fist was wrapped around the butt.

Larry McGill wrinkled his forehead in a deep frown; a vague unrest stirred him. He decided he needed a drink. When he reached for it, the breed beat him to it and handed it to him. It was while he drank that his mind shot back to the events of the night before; the apparent pitiless wiping out of Pete Dillon—and it *was* right apparent. And now this senseless waiting to see who would be next.

He should have let old Mooseface in on the plan. But what the hell! If Mooseface was half the sheriff his Uncle Ozzy was he'd know the plan by this time. In spite of the heat, Larry found himself shivering. These brooding slopes *did* conceal some strange barbarous deviltry!

Cupping his hands to the back of his head, Larry McGill stretched full length on his bunk of sand. He studied the unnerved movements of the half-breed sentry, framed against the sky above. He noticed that the .44 had stopped vibrating, that it was absolutely motionless. He turned on his side and saw the rigid Poco staring straight into the blackness of the slopes, straight into the same greenish, phosphorescent lake, its mythical waves lashing at the side of the slopes. Larry's eyes widened momentarily, then snapped shut.

It was not quite daylight when Larry McGill sat up again, his two fists rolling in front of his eyes. He saw the gaunt frame of the sheriff, old Mooseface. He saw the black mop of *mestizo* hair next. Suddenly plunging his right arm forward, he clenched his fists in the breed's hair.

"Sheriff!" yelled Larry, releasing his grip on Poco's hair. "Hank! Hank! Where's Hank! Hank's gone!"

HE SWUNG around to Poco, saw him grabbing at his belt. The .44 was gone. Poco slapped at both hip pockets, then seemed to recollect. He turned to meet the blank glare of Mooseface. Twice, the breed tried to speak, grabbed for words.

Then finally he said quaveringly: "My .44, it—"

"Dang your greasy hide!" interrupted Larry McGill. "Never mind the .44! I told you to keep awake 'til Hank went on watch!"

"Hank, he sit there very straight. Before I sleep again he speak to me. I give him the gun to be sure he is 'wake," pleaded Poco. "It is the devil desert—evil spirits, I tell you!" he shouted. "I will never stay here another night. Not even one hour! Now I will not stay in this place one more minute!" His fists pounded at his chest.

"Reckon you ain't goin' no place, Poco. Not unless it might be the same place Hank and the rest of them went," suggested the sheriff. "'Specially now with Hank gone, you and

Larry here, and me is goin' to have to stand longer watch tonight."

Larry McGill shrugged, deliberately. Then he filled a cigarette paper and half of the tobacco trickled to the sand. "I—ah—I ain't so sure, sheriff, I want another night in this creepy camp," he stuttered.

"Ain't s c a r e d, Larry?" asked Mooseface.

"He is ver' scared and for that I do not blame him. This place—it is very bad," the breed whined.

"The place ain't so bad," Mooseface went on. Then he turned straight at Larry McGill. "It's what's happenin' in it that's bad. We come out here lookin' for Lem Sprow and somethin' happens to Pete Dillon." He wheeled around again and confronted the half-breed squarely. "Then we go lookin' for Pete an' that night Andy disappears. Now Hank's gone an' tonight like as not—"

"It's goin' to be me!" shouted Larry McGill.

"We'll see," Mooseface replied. "It's gettin' light now an' we can all start out lookin' again."

The half-breed shook his head. "I have decided that there is no use to look. It is mystery—these devil place—which can never be solve. It is best to leave."

"You heard what I said before an' I ain't sayin' it again! No one leaves this camp 'til this thing's cleared up. Just so's I'm sure I don't have to start lookin' for you, Poco, I'm keepin' you close to me today and Larry can circle around to the north. That is—dependin' Uncle Ozzy ain't scared to go alone. We'll start out in the other direction an' swing around in time to get back here by dark. You savvy, Larry? We get back here by dark."

The low, sharp-bending slopes of the desert loomed up closer as Mooseface and the breed pushed slowly on. Mooseface looked back only once; saw the tiny figure of Larry fade quickly over the horizon. The burning red-spot sun in the sky climbed higher.

On and on they prodded as the breed's throat ached for water. With canteen empty, his tortured gaze clung to the one hanging at Mooseface's side. The rise and fall of his sand-filled boots changed to pitiful dragging in the powdered alkali. Lunging blindly forward into the blast of furnace heat, he reached for a pebble, which he sucked loudly as he pulled himself to his feet.

Two silent figures prodded on as the sun dropped from sight. As darkness overtook them, they arrived back at camp and the half-breed quickly filled his canteen. Mooseface watched him as he swung around in consternation to find that the camp had been disturbed.

"That blanket—it has been move," the breed said, pointing.

"Never mind that ghost talk—won't do you no good. If Larry don't show up, you an' me stand guard tonight. You first—then—" There was a slight stirring sound in back of Mooseface. He wheeled around, snaking six-gun from holster. When he saw no one, he dropped his gun arm.

THE exhausted *mestizo* stretched himself out full length at the edge of camp but did not close his eyes. A restless star, streaking a path through the heavens, brought Poco back to his feet. Mooseface watched the breed as he stood staring into the night.

Suddenly Mooseface shifted his eyes to the blanket which, the previous night, had been occupied by Larry. Something round, about the size of a man's head, slowly pushed itself up from the sands underneath. Pausing momentarily, it settled back. Then again the center of the blanket came up, this time a little higher. The breed let out the most blood-freezing yell Mooseface had ever heard, as the middle of the blanket took on more shape. Blanket-hidden head, shoulders and arms of a man became visible.

Slowly the sheriff's gun arm leveled off at the moving form. Then, as the muzzle turned slowly upward, the six-gun spoke once. The *mestizo* reached

for the stars as his trembling frame pitched forward. Rolling over on his back, he pawed at his chest and middle. When he realized that he had not stopped hot lead, he sat up, tried to speak.

"Ugh—what—" stuttered the breed, moist beads on his grimy forehead.

"That's it, Poco!" came a husky voice, rumbling up from the floor of the desert. "One of the men you killed! Our bodies coming back out of the dust! Murder! You couldn't get away with it—"

Mooseface pointed to the moving blanket which slowly fell back to earth. He, too, was visibly disturbed. Then he spoke.

"See, there is another one!" And the hump began to grow again in the center of the blanket. "Comin' up out of the dust! Comin' back to torture you for the rest of your life! Every one of them you killed!"

"No—no!" Poco blurted in terror. "Not them—not every one! Only Lem. I kill him, yes. For the gold. We strike ver' rich gold. I cache the gold —I bury Lem. Between two big rocks. I don't know where. The sand covers over—I come for the sheriff so everything will look good. Now you have the whole story—there is no more to tell. These others, it is these devil desert. She swallow them up, same as Lem."

"All right, spook," growled Mooseface as he tramped forward, bent and threw the blanket back. "You can climb out now." Mooseface reached over to give Larry a lift out of the hole the deputy had made by scooping sand out from between two big rocks.

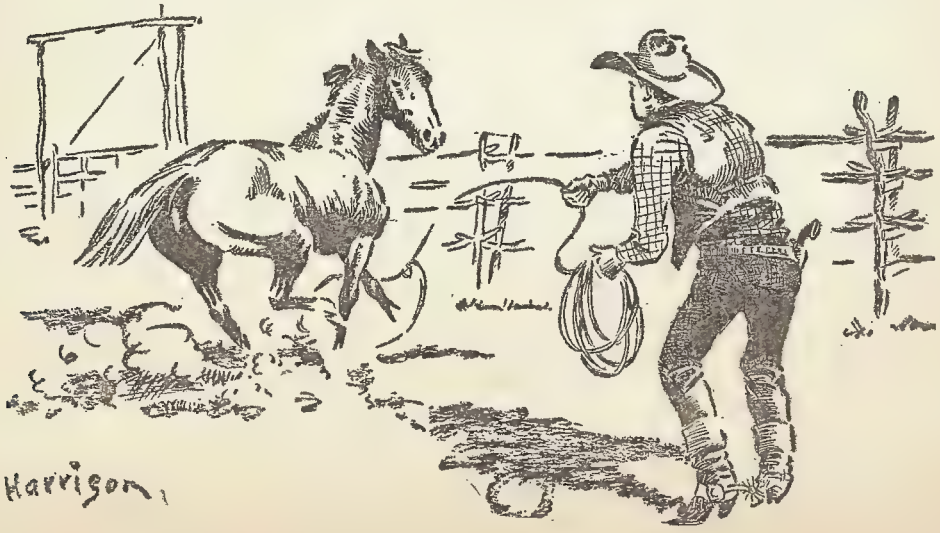
The big Mooseface jaw hung open like a lantern, then closed with one word: "How—"

"I just did me a little animal reckonin'," Larry explained. "No animal buries anything far away that he can bury close. And it was a cinch that this was a buryin' job. I tramped around here almost that whole first day 'til I located this combination gold cache and grave between these rocks. I moved the gold and poor Lem's body to a place where I'll show you, and filled up the place between the rocks with sand again. Then I moved the camp smack on top of it so I could work this blanket stunt when the time was ripe—so's to scare a confession out of Poco."

"Yeah, but—"

"I didn't want to reveal my plan 'til it came each man's time to back-trek to town. More real this way and that's how—"

"Your Uncle Ozzy woulda done it!"



STAMPEDE

Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

REIN up your broncs, pards, and mosey over to Powder River Bill's writin' roundup. Pen-pushers from all over the world are just honin' to tell you about far-away ranges and the folks who live on them. Rope yourselves some new amigos by sending in your letters to the Stampede department. You'll find plenty of hombres and gals who would like to exchange snapshots and souvenirs, and learn about your hobbies.

And, too, Powder River Bill wants to savvy the type of yarns you cotton to, so that you can read them in WESTERN TRAILS. Don't fail to state the names of your favorite authors to insure your getting tophand stories of the brand you prefer. You'll be interested in this month's lineup of writin' rannyhans.

A New Yorker wants pen pals from Western and Northern states.

Dear Bill:

I have just finished my WESTERN TRAILS magazine, and can hardly wait for the next one to be published. Kindly find my ballot enclosed. I have read several copies, and it is my favorite Western magazine.

I would like pen pals from Western and Northern states, if possible. My hobbies are roller-skating, ice-skating, and collecting snapshots. I am six feet tall, weigh 165 pounds, have dark hair and brown eyes. My age is nineteen.

At present my work is slack, so I will have time to answer all letters.

Best of luck to WESTERN TRAILS—truly a good magazine.

Yours truly,

ROBERT EHRHARDT,
1756 Anthony Ave.,
Bronx, New York City

An hombre from California will send a snapshot with each letter.

Dear Bill:

I have read one of your WESTERN TRAILS magazines, and think it's a wonderful book. From now on, it's my choice. I'd like to know some pen pals who are lonely for companionship.

PARDNER PETE'S Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch o' their snapshot, send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Illinois

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs, write to—

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenaw Avenue
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written 'bout their picture send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

My home is in Los Angeles, California. I'm not a real cowboy, but I know my cattle. I'm working for the California State Division of Forestry, stationed at Beaumont, California.

I am twenty-four years of age, weigh 160 pounds, have black curly hair, and I'm five feet, eleven inches tall. I would like to hear from girls within six years of my age. I will answer all letters and send a snapshot of myself.

Sincerely,

LEO EDMONDSON
Route 1, Box 26
Beaumont, Calif.

A gent from Minnesota crashes the pen-pal gate.

Dear Bill:

Having been an ardent reader of WESTERN TRAILS and considering it tops in reading entertainment, I've decided to see if I might crash the pen-pal gate. I've often contemplated writing before to see if I might, but —well, you know how those things are. The thought chiefly was that it probably wouldn't do any good.

Possibly a description is in order here, if someone by any chance should care to write. I am about five feet eight inches in height, weigh 145 pounds, have dark hair and gray eyes, and am twenty-four years young.

I have traveled quite extensively through the southern and southwestern parts of our U.S.A. I am particularly interested in Arizona, so if someone should care to write from there I would appreciate it very much. Of course, I shall welcome letters from everyone in any state and shall do my level best to make replies. I should also like to exchange photos with anyone who would care to do likewise.

Here's to continued success for your splendid publication and a "Thank you," if this should be published.

Sincerely,

"BUCK" ROGERS,
Route No. 1,
Mankato, Minn.

All you folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here is the ballot comin' up right now. Just mark "1"—"2"—"3"—"4"—an' so on in the empty boxes beside the authors' names in the order of your likin'.

Adios till next time, folks!

Topband Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

JACK DRUMMOND *Gun Ghouls Ride in Kamima*	
DEAN OWEN *Saddle Bum's Bargain*	
J. EDWARD LEITHEAD *Renegades on the Powderhorn*	
RALPH BENNITT *Desperado Doom*	
RALPH EMERSON KRUEGER *Hot-Trail Treachery*	
JOHN G. PEARSOL *The Texas Firebrand*	

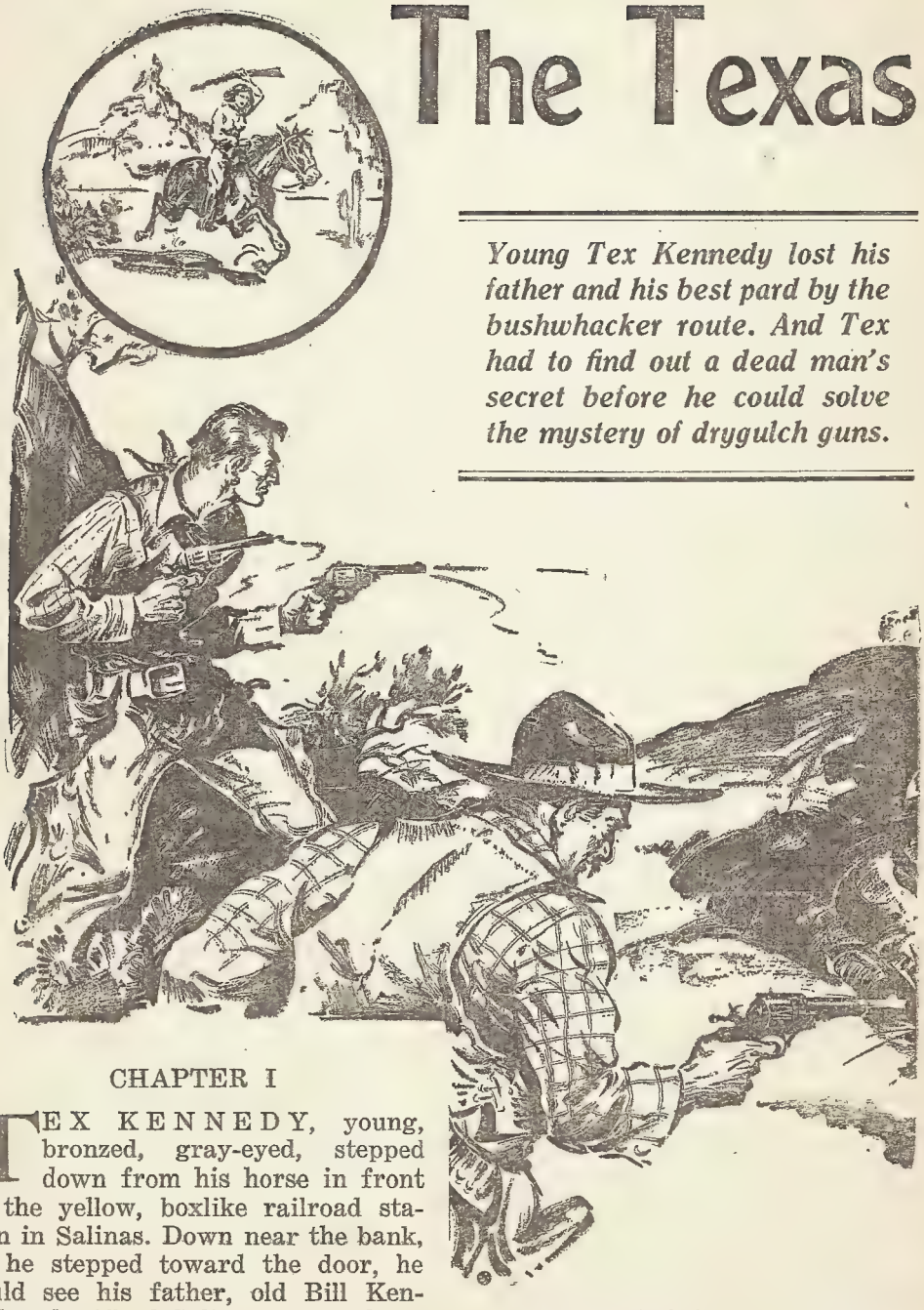
Name .....

Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS *reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.*

The Texas

Young Tex Kennedy lost his father and his best pard by the bushwhacker route. And Tex had to find out a dead man's secret before he could solve the mystery of drygulch guns.



CHAPTER I

TEX KENNEDY, young, bronzed, gray-eyed, stepped down from his horse in front of the yellow, boxlike railroad station in Salinas. Down near the bank, as he stepped toward the door, he could see his father, old Bill Kennedy, sheriff of Salinas, going down the street with a stranger.

"You going to have my cattle cars here for sure?" Tex asked Willis, the station agent. "I can't start a drive until the cars are here."

"They'll be here tonight," said Willis. "They're rollin' now. You can start loadin' in the morning."

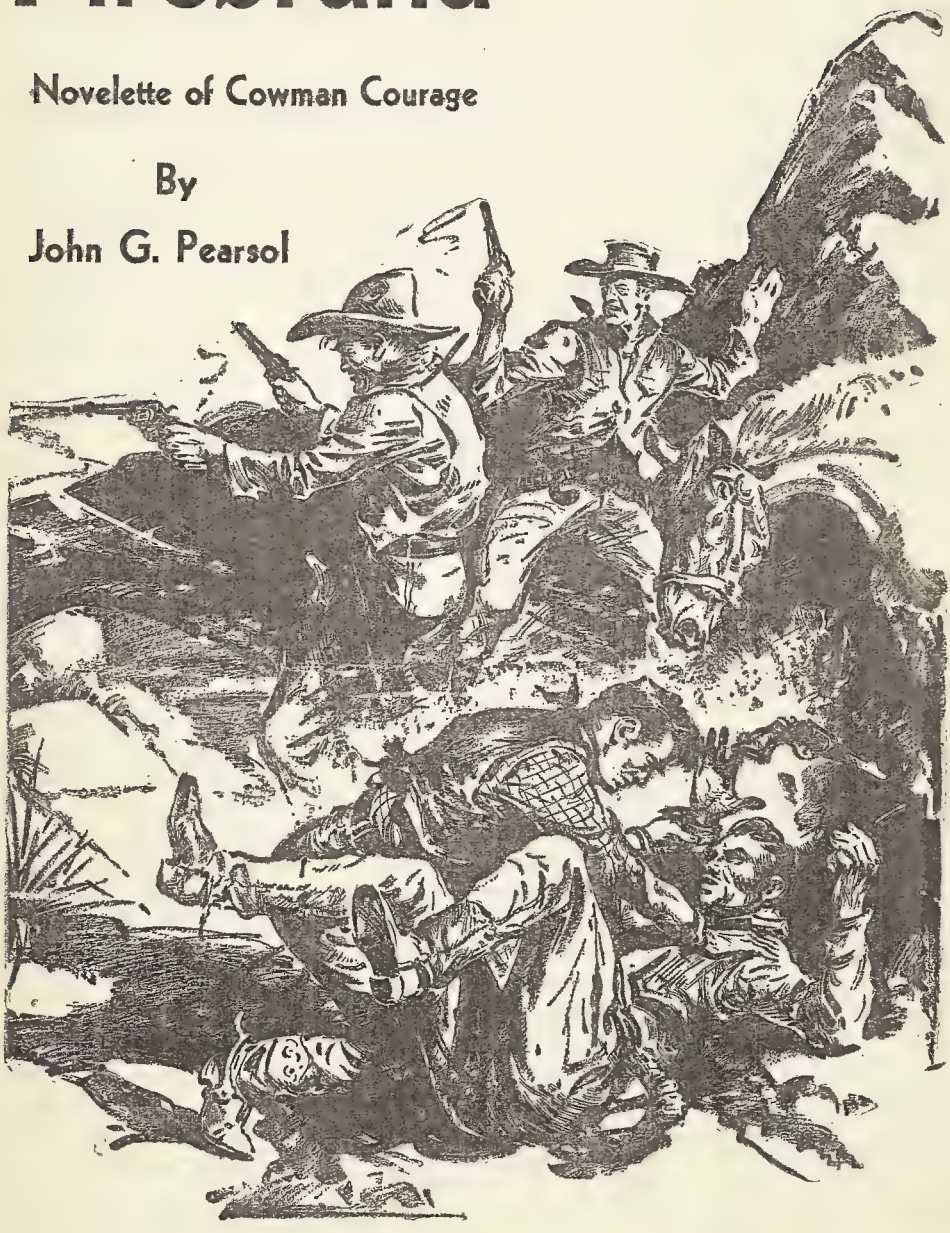
Tex Kennedy went out to his horse. His father was coming out of the bank with his hand on young Tom Reed's arm, followed by the stranger and Bassett Coldwell, the owner of the bank. Tom Reed was about Tex Kennedy's age, tall, lean, but dressed

Firebrand

Novelette of Cowman Courage

By

John G. Pearsol



in blue serge breeches, a white shirt and no hat.

He seemed to be sore as hell about something, and he shook old Bill Kennedy's hand off his arm. His voice carried up to where Tex was leading his horse toward the street. Tom Reed worked in Coldwell's bank.

"Take your damn hands off me!" young Tom said. "I told you this would happen, didn't I? I discovered the shortage."

"A warrant has been sworn out, Tom," said Bill Kennedy. "I have to serve it. The bank examiner signed it and so did Coldwell. There'll have to be a trial. Everything will come out in court."

Coldwell, fat, bespectacled, wearing a black suit, walked behind Bill Kennedy and Tom Reed. Tom Reed walked very stiffly, his back very straight, and his face was red, his eyes flashing. Tex Kennedy guessed that there had been a shortage in the bank and the bank examiner and Coldwell were blaming it on Tom. Tex was sorry if that was it. Tex was engaged to marry Sally Reed, Tom's sister. And Tom was a fine young gent. Tex didn't think he'd steal.

Tom Reed suddenly leaped to one side as he passed the hitchrail near the Bullhide Saloon. He swung up onto the back of a horse hitched there, whirled it about. Bill Kennedy yelled for Tom to stop, but Reed pounded his heels against the horse's sides. A cloud of dust rolled up behind him as he raced on, his voice floating back to Tex Kennedy there on the street behind him.

"To hell with you, Bill Kennedy," he yelled. "You'll never lock me up!"

Old Bill Kennedy ducked under the hitchrail. He leaped up on a horse and thundered down the street after Tom Reed. Coldwell was yelling something about killing somebody, but in the noise and confusion Tex Kennedy couldn't quite get what he said. From the other end of the street a buckboard came into town. On the seat was old Buck Reed, Tom's father, and his daughter, Sally.

They stopped near the saloon, and Tex Kennedy watched the color leave Sally Reed's face as she gradually realized what the crowd was talking about. Old Buck Reed climbed stiffly down from the buckboard seat. He moved over to the crowd and touched Bassett Coldwell on the shoulder. Tex Kennedy moved up close to where he could hear what Buck Reed said.

"Do I understand that you're accusing Tom of stealing?" he asked. "Did you swear out a warrant for his arrest?"

Bassett Coldwell's round head nodded violently. His eyes flashed behind his glasses.

"That's exactly right," he said. "There's money gone and his books have been altered. He's a thief and I've sworn out a warrant for his arrest."

Old Buck Reed stood very still and stared into Bassett Coldwell's eyes.

"Are you mighty darn sure of yourself, Coldwell?" he asked. "You have to know what you're doing when you lock anybody up behind bars."

Coldwell sneered.

"Of course I'm sure of myself," he said. "Your son's a dirty thief, Reed. Jail is where he belongs, and jail is where he's going!"

Buck Reed's fist whipped up very suddenly. It cracked on Bassett Coldwell's fat chin. Coldwell rocked back, stumbled and sat down very suddenly, an expression of mingled rage and surprise on his pink-cheeked face.

"Nobody's a dirty thief," said Buck Reed coldly, "until after he's been proven that in court. I don't want to hear any more cracks like that until after a trial! It won't be healthy for anybody!"

WEEMS, old Bill Kennedy's deputy, pushed his way through the crowd and stood in front of Buck Reed. "You calm down, Buck," he said. "We won't have any more fighting."

"The hell we won't," said Buck Reed belligerently. "We'll have a whole town full of it, unless folks keep a curb on their tongues!"

"Lock him up too!" yelled Bassett Coldwell as he scrambled to his feet. "I'll swear out a warrant for him! Assault and battery! Assault with intent—"

"Aw go soak your head!" said Weems disgustedly.

The man Tex Kennedy took to be the bank examiner, a short chunky fellow wearing a business suit and a derby hat, said: "The law doesn't seem to have the proper respect for a banker, Mister Coldwell."

Coldwell muttered something unintelligible. Tex Kennedy started toward Sally Reed. But he stopped and turned to look in the direction in which she was staring, a peculiar expression of horror gradually coming into her eyes. Everybody stopped talking all of a sudden. Everybody stared at old Bill Kennedy as he rode slowly into town, leading a riderless horse, the one on which Tom Reed had made his dash for freedom.

It was very quiet all of a sudden. The soft, plodding sound of Bill Kennedy's horse's hoofs seemed loud in Tex Kennedy's ears until he stopped there in front of the crowd.

Bill Kennedy kept looking at old Buck Reed. Buck Reed's face grew very stony. His eyes grew gradually chill and hard, as he looked from Sheriff Kennedy to the riderless horse he led.

"Where's Tom?" he asked, a note in his voice that hinted at dread.

Bill Kennedy looked around at the white face of Sally Reed before he answered. He looked at Tex Kennedy, then at Buck Reed. It seemed as though he hated to say what he was going to say.

"I think Tom is dead," he said woodenly. "I'm sorry. I'd give anything on earth not to have been forced to do it. But Tom went crazy. There was a gun in a saddle holster on the horse he took. He got the gun out and started to shoot at me. I shot to scare him. I didn't try to hit him. He jumped his horse over the cliff into the Pecos River. I found the horse, but I couldn't find Tom."

Old Buck Reed's face went gray under its heavy tan. His lips tightened. Suddenly his hand whipped back toward his gun.

"Damn you, Kennedy!" he yelled hoarsely.

Weems, the deputy, leaped forward and knocked Buck Reed off balance. He grasped the old man's gun and wrenched it out of Buck's hand. Buck spread his booted feet out wide apart and stared at Sheriff Kennedy. His eyes burned with a wild light, a light akin to madness.

"You're a murderer, Bill," he said. "You didn't need to kill him. I know you didn't have to do it! You're too gun-handy, Kennedy!"

Bill Kennedy said nothing. Shoulders slumped, dejected, he moved his horse on up the street and tied the one Tom Reed had ridden to the hitchrail. Then he mounted and rode out of town again. Tex Kennedy watched him till he was out of sight. He wanted to go down to where Sally was sitting there in the buckboard seat. He wanted to say something that would lessen the pain of this thing that had happened.

But he couldn't think of anything to say. It seemed to be pretty ironclad. There was nothing to do about it. Somebody stole some money from the bank, and Buck Reed lost a son, and Sally Reed lost a brother, and old Bill Kennedy had been forced to shoot a kid he thought a hell of a lot of.

Knowing that maybe he'd killed the son of an old friend was what had driven old Bill Kennedy off by himself now. He would be brooding over the sternness of his master, the Law, the thing that allowed him to play no favorites. There was no way to change any of it.

BUCK REED went into the store, and Tex Kennedy started down the street toward Sally. Simms, the grizzled old puncher who worked for Tex on his spread, stopped Tex in front of the store.

"The car's gonna be here?" he asked Tex.

Tex nodded. "They'll be here to-

night," he said. "We can start loading in the morning."

"You won't drive any damn Kennedy cattle over my range!" said a voice behind Tex Kennedy.

He turned and old Buck Reed was there on the store steps, that blaze of hate still in his eyes, his lips tight.

"Not a damn hoof of Kennedy cattle will ever cross my land again," he said. "If you load cattle tomorrow you'll drive 'em over the mountains!"

Tex Kennedy looked around at Sally, and her face was white and set. Her eyes were filled with grief and pain. But there was a stoniness there that made Tex Kennedy know suddenly that Tom Reed's being killed had changed his life as well as everybody's. His name was Kennedy, and no Kennedy would ever be anything other than an enemy to anybody named Reed from now on!

"We had an agreement about a right to drive cattle from my place across your land, Buck," Tex said to the old man. "Don't let this thing upset your reason. You know that my father would rather have cut off his arm than hurt Tom Reed. But he had to try to catch him. Maybe he had to shoot him to save his own life. Can't you see that, Buck? He *had* to!"

Buck Reed's face lost none of its stoniness. None of the hate fled from his eyes.

"Yeah," he said woodenly. "An' I have to tell you to go to hell when you want to drive beef across my place!"

Tex looked at Sally again, but she was looking at Simms.

"Will you come here a minute, Simms?" she asked.

Simms stepped out to the buckboard and Sally took a diamond ring from her finger and laid it into Simms' hand.

"Give that to Mister Kennedy," she said.

Simms looked uncomfortable as hell as he stepped back to the boardwalk and laid the ring into Tex Kennedy's palm. Old Buck Reed climbed into the buckboard seat and turned the team around. A cloud of dust rose up behind them as they raced down the street. Tex tucked the ring in his vest pocket and kept staring out across the desert where the dust rose up behind the buckboard.

"Now what?" asked Simms. "The cars will be in, but we can't load 'em."

"We'll have to load," said Tex Kennedy. "We'll have to bring them across Reed's place. I don't think he'll try to stop us. Go on out and get them together. I'll be out after while. First, I want to hunt up dad. I think he needs somebody to talk to him."

"It must make a man feel like hell to have to shoot a man he thinks a heap of," said Simms as he moved away. "I reckon it would help to talk to him."

TEX nodded. He got his horse cut off into the hills in the direction he'd seen old Bill Kennedy go. His lips tightened. Memory plagued him as he couldn't erase the picture of Sally, handing a diamond ring to Simms, saying: "Give that to Mister Kennedy!"

A shot, high and sharp, like the spiteful bark of a high-powered rifle came to Tex Kennedy's ears and he stopped and listened. He heard nothing and rode on again. Give that to Mister Kennedy! Those damn words kept ringing in his brain. And old Buck Reed, hate in his eyes, staring at him, saying that not a hoof of damned Kennedy cattle would ever cross his land again. But Kennedy cattle *had* to cross his land!

There was an agreement between Buck Reed and Tex Kennedy that the strip of land owned by Buck just north of Tex Kennedy's place was for the use of Kennedy in driving beef to market. Without the use of that strip Tex Kennedy was sunk. He'd be bankrupt!

Suddenly Tex stopped. In front of him, arms outflung, lying on his face,

a man was sprawled in the trail. Tex's heart began to pound as he sat there and stared at that quiet form for a moment, at the bloody stain that discolored the man's vest at its back. Slowly he dismounted, bent down and rolled the limp form over, stared at the pale face of his father, old Bill Kennedy.

He was dead. He'd been shot in the back. From his vest pocket a piece of paper showed whitely in the dim light of dusk that had settled over the hills. Tex Kennedy stared around at the silent rocks, at the dim, purple-topped hills. His lips tightened and he guessed he knew how old Buck Reed had felt when somebody suddenly announced to him that his son was dead. It made a man want to take a gun in his hand and kill somebody. It killed something inside a fellow.

Gently, Tex pulled the paper from the old man's pocket. In the dim light he read:

It's a deal. Come with Zurk to the old Circle Dot line camp at midnight tomorrow night. I'll have part of the job done by then. Bring a thousand dollars.

The bottom and top of the note had been burned, was browned at the edge by a fire. The signature had been burned off. The name of the person to whom it had been addressed was burned off.

Tex wondered if Bill had been heading toward the line camp now, just before he had been murdered. Had the one who had written this note killed Bill Kennedy? Or had old Buck Reed, crazed by grief, taken a rifle and shot his old friend in the back?

Wearily, Tex picked the old man up in his arms. He rode across the hills to his ranch in the basin. He laid his father's body on the porch. Simms was not there. Tex dug a grave and lined it with boards from the saddle shed. He made a box of it and laid old Bill Kennedy to rest in it. He filled up the grave.

Tex had never been very affectionate with the old man, but he had a hell of a hard time swallowing something in his throat as he stood there. He wiped a mistiness from his eyes as he looked back over the years the old man had raised him. And Tex found nothing in those years but a lot of self-sacrifice and unselfishness in what old Bill Kennedy had done.

CHAPTER II

IN THE dim light of a newly risen moon, a silver scimitar in the sky, Tex Kennedy rode westward again. He set off in the direction of the Circle Dot line camp, the old deserted shack mentioned in the note he'd found on Bill. Tex stopped in the brush, waited, watched till the gray of dawn reached out to lighten the hills. But nothing stirred. No riders came, and Tex went back again, to the range where Simms was gathering the cattle.

Simms had them bunched. Tex swung in behind them, and they pushed them north. They passed the ranch house, and Tex unbuckled his gunbelt, handed it to Simms.

"Take this into the ranch," he told the old puncher. "I don't want to have a gunfight with Reed. Leave yours there too. I'm afraid, after what's happened, that I'll be too hair-trigger."

Simms took the gun. He studied the lines in Tex Kennedy's face, the misery in his eyes.

"What the hell," he said. "Just what did happen?"

"Somebody killed Bill," Tex told him. "I buried him in the ranchyard —while you were bunching the cattle."

Simms looked down at the gun in his hand. He looked up at Tex again, and fire flamed in his eyes.

"Okay," he said. "You're the boss. But, personal, I'd blow hell out of somebody!"

"That's what I'm afraid I'd do," said Tex Kennedy.

Simms shrugged, galloped off. Tex Kennedy hazed the cattle on, and soon Simms caught up with him. Simms had taken off his gunbelt. They neared Buck Reed's land and some riders spurred out from the east and stopped ahead of the moving herd. Old Buck Reed moved out from the riders and held up his hand. Simms and Tex started the cattle milling, and stopped them.

"Git them cattle off my property!" yelled old Buck Reed.

Tex and Simms moved out in front of Reed and the others. There were four punchers behind Reed. They were Davis, Jim Berger, Hollis and Zurk Edwards. They were all armed.

"You heard me?" yelled Buck Reed as Tex and Simms stopped.

"I heard you," said Tex. "But they have to go through. We had that agreement and you have to live up to it, Reed. My cars are waiting."

"The hell you say!" snapped Buck Reed. "Start 'em back, fellows!"

He waved his hand and the punchers moved out toward the cattle, ropes whirling, starting the leaders back in the way they had come. Simms uttered a snarling curse and spurred his bronc out between the punchers and the cattle.

"Leave them critters alone!" he yelled.

His hand whipped down toward the rope on his saddle. A gun in the hand of Zurk Edwards cracked flatly and Simms stiffened in his saddle. He toppled, fell. The others flashed past him, yelling at the cattle, stampeding them back in the Kennedy range. Huge clouds of dust swirled up in their wake. The thunder of their hoofs became a deep rumble, their husky-voiced bawl a raucous sound in Tex Kennedy's ears as he sat there and stared at the still form of Simms.

ZURK and the others circled and came back, and Tex Kennedy still hadn't moved. He switched his icy eyes from Simms to Zurk.

"Simms didn't have a gun, Zurk," he said to the Reed puncher. "I don't have a gun now. But I'm going to get one. I'm going to kill you the next time I lay eyes on you!"

He turned, picked up Simms and rode swiftly away, through the scattered cattle, unmindful of them, unmindful of anything except that the time for action had come. He didn't know who had killed Bill Kennedy, but he did know who had killed Simms. Something inside of him seemed to have turned to ice, and he told himself that Buck Reed had no reason to go back on his agreement to let the Kennedy cattle through.

Reed had no reason to hate Bill Kennedy for doing something that his duty had made him do. And maybe Buck Reed had killed Bill. Maybe he had holed up in the hills and shot him in the back. A man who went back on his agreements was the sort to shoot a man in the back.

Zurk Edwards was a murderer, but it was a cinch the law would never touch him for it. Buck Reed, his hate guiding him, would see that there was plenty of men to swear to a lie. He would see that Zurk Edwards wouldn't get into trouble for shooting a man who didn't have a gun.

At the ranch house, Tex dug another grave. He laid Simms beside old Bill Kennedy. He got his gun and belted it on him. He swung Simms' gun about his waist, then he rode into Salinas, the shadows creeping down the street as he stopped in front of the saloon where five Reed-branded horses were tied. Tex started in the door and Weems, the deputy, called to him.

"Give me your gun, Tex," Weems said. "Zurk Edwards is in there. I heard about the shooting. We'll have no killing over it."

Tex Kennedy smiled coldly.

"What did you hear?" he asked.

"I heard you tried to push some cattle across Reed's place when he didn't want it," Weems said. "I heard that Simms went loco and tried to kill

Zurk Edwards and Zurk had to shoot him. And I heard that you'd sworn to kill Zurk. Give me your gun."

Tex Kennedy shook his head nervously, positively.

"You heard it wrong," he said coolly. "Simms didn't have a gun. He was murdered. Zurk murdered him. You can't have my gun! Not unless you want to fight for it!"

"If you start any trouble I'll have to jail you, Tex," Weems warned. "It's one of them things. There's five men swearing you're a liar. I have to take five against one."

"Sure." Tex pushed on the door. "You go ahead and take their word."

His voice carried a world of sarcasm and Weems frowned. He followed Tex Kennedy inside. Tex stepped to one side of the door and stood there for a while, his eyes on Zurk Edwards at the bar. As the minutes ticked past a lot of men came inside. But there wasn't much noise. Nobody seemed to have much to say.

Every once in a while Zurk Edwards turned and stared for a couple of tense seconds at Tex Kennedy's pale, lined face. Then he turned and took a drink. But Buck Reed kept on staring at Tex, that blaze of hate still in his eyes, a twisted smile of mockery on his lips.

FINALLY Zurk Edwards turned again. The room was very quiet now. "What the hell you starin' at?" Edwards asked huskily. "If you've got anything on your chest let's get it over with!"

Tex Kennedy smiled thinly, queerly, wickedly.

"Sure," he said softly. "Sure. I'm looking at a dirty murderer. I came in here after you, but I've been waiting till you had guts enough to turn around. I'm—"

Zurk Edwards' hands jerked. Tex Kennedy laughed as his hands whipped up his guns. The room was filled suddenly with the rocking jar of a shot. Smoke puffed out from one of Tex Kennedy's guns. Zurk Edwards stumbled backward against the bar, then slid down and lay still on the floor. Tex Kennedy kept his guns steady, and his lips in that twisted smile as he moved slowly toward the door.

"Arrest him, Weems!" called Buck Reed heatedly. "It was self-defense on Edwards' part. You heard it. You heard Kennedy say he came in here after Edwards. Edwards had to try to shoot!"

"Be careful, Weems," Tex Kennedy said coldly as he backed toward the door. He switched his eyes to Buck Reed. "Somebody shot my father in the back last night," he told the old rancher. "I hope to hell it wasn't you, because I'm going to kill the man who did it!"

Then he leaped backward out the door. He vaulted into his saddle and raced down the street. A shot flamed out in the darkness and a hot iron burned its fiery way through his side. Tex weaved in the saddle as he raced along, that grim smile still on his lips. He wondered if he'd been a fool to kill Zurk Edwards.

The note he had in his pocket said that Zurk would bring someone to the line camp at midnight. With Zurk dead, would the other person appear? Would there be any way to discover who had killed Bill, and who had written the note that mentioned the thousand dollars. And what was the job that the writer of the note had said he'd have half done by midnight? Had that meant the murder of Bill Kennedy?

On through the night, Tex Kennedy raced, the bitterness within him a weighty thing that seemed like a material load on his shoulders. He stopped in the hills and watched a posse race across the flats and stop at his ranch. They went on again, and Tex Kennedy stole down to the ranch after they were gone and packed together some rations.

He filled a water bag and hung it on his saddle horn. He put extra boxes of shells in his saddle bags. He

stopped in the doorway of the house and listened to the thunder of hoofs that rumbled out there on the flats. He pressed back inside the house as they came close. He shut the door as horsemen stopped in the yard.

"Tex Kennedy," somebody called

Tex didn't answer. The voice was strange. He didn't remember having heard it before. It wasn't Weems' voice.

"Kennedy," came the call again.

"What?" called Tex Kennedy.

"Step out here in the yard a minute," said the voice.

Something screamed a warning to Tex. He smiled there in the darkness.

"Why?" he asked.

There was a little silence. The dark forms were motionless out there. Somebody said something in a low voice and a shot rapped out into the night. Then a bullet whistled in through the open window beside where Tex stood. He moved back and more shots came.

Five or six guns coughed out a raucous medley of sound out there. The bullets snapped and snarled through the room and knocked at the door and smashed through the windows. A tiny flame of fire winked suddenly into life near the door. A dim form sped across the ranchyard in the dim light. Tex shot, but the form sped on.

THE flame leaped higher at the door. Tex opened it a trifle and tried to kick out the fire, but a swarm of bullets drove him back inside. The smoke seeped through the cracks and filled the room, and Tex began to cough. The heat became intense and the room seemed filled with licking, dancing flame.

Tiny firebrands floated down from the ceiling, and some of them ignited Tex's shirt and he beat the smoldering flames out with his hands. The paper in his pocket, the note he'd taken out of old Bill Kennedy's pocket, burst into flame. He snatched it out and extinguished the flame, but the paper floated away in the darkness and Tex couldn't find it again.

He told himself to hell with it. He didn't need it. He wouldn't need anything if he didn't get out of here. It didn't look much as if he would get out. It looked as if he'd burn to death.

Out in the yard the guns still popped, but not so fast now. Those gents out there didn't give a damn whether he was killed by a bullet or not. If he didn't step out into the light where they could see him to kill him, he'd die in the flames. Why should they care? They could wait!

The smoke became thicker. The heat became worse. The flames were fierce, licking tongues of fire that seared and burned as Tex crouched beside a window, trying to gain a breath of air. Outside he saw that the smoke was thick. The flames had crawled inside the room, but they hadn't burned their way up through the roof. It was dark out there in the swirling smoke.

Tex Kennedy threw one leg over the window sill. He slid outside, and the smoke swirled thick to cover him. He coughed and moved around the house to where some horses were tied to the corral posts. He untied one and slipped into the saddle. The wind shifted and the smoke moved.

Somebody yelled as he put spurs to the bronc. A bullet screamed past him, and the guns began to roar and rattle with renewed vigor. A bullet smashed through his leg. He raked the horse beneath him and turned it off into the darkness.

Behind him now he heard the rumble of hoofs, but the horsemen didn't turn as he had turned. They missed him. He rode more slowly now, his leg aching, his side throbbing, a sickening giddiness coming to him. He wondered who had attacked him back there.

It wasn't the posse, headed by Weems, for they had ridden on past the ranch earlier in the night. It might have been Buck Reed and his

punchers. The voice that he couldn't recognize might have been one of the punchers. Maybe Buck Reed had a rendezvous with somebody in the old Circle Dot line camp at midnight. Buck Reed had a thousand dollars!

On into the hills Tex Kennedy rode, his lips tight across his lined face. There was an ache inside of him as he kept thinking of Sally, of her giving back the ring; of old Bill Kennedy and Simms, dead. Off in the hills Tex heard the mutter of hoofs and he stopped and hid till he couldn't hear them. Then he went on, and the old line camp was before him.

He crouched in the brush and watched the shack. The moon rose and bathed it in a silver radiance, to make it a dull black hulking thing among the glistening gray of the moon-silvered rocks. The clatter of hoofs came faintly up into the hills to Tex's ears. Five horsemen rode suddenly into the clearing, stopped at the old shack and dismounted.

Tex Kennedy smiled, and his eyes glowed.

"It's nearly midnight," somebody said down at the shack. "He'll be here in a minute or two if he's coming."

CHAPTER III

THE click of steel-shod hoofs on the rock sounded in just a little while. The men down at the line camp hid behind the rocks and in the brush. The glitter of metal showed down there as a gun was trained from a brush clump in the direction of the sound. A rider came into the clearing and looked nervously about. The moon glinted down and reflected on the glasses the rider wore, showed the plump form of Bassett Coldwell, the banker at Salinas!

"Ford Tabor," he called.

A tall man stepped out from behind a rock and Tex Kennedy recognized him. Ford Tabor, a wanted outlaw on whose head a price had been set, a man whose face was on a reward poster on old Bill Kennedy's office wall.

Bassett Coldwell dismounted and handed something to Tabor. Their voices were too low now for Tex Kennedy to hear the words. He heard only a low mutter of voices. But he didn't give a damn what they said. Now he knew who had originally had the note he'd found in Bill Kennedy's pocket! Coldwell had a deal with an outlaw. Maybe Coldwell was a murderer!

Coldwell rode away, and Tex Kennedy slid noiselessly back and took his horse by the reins. Silently, he led it off into the darkness, mounted and rode away from the line camp until he was out of earshot. Then he hurried. Down on the flat he saw Coldwell, and put spurs to his horse. He circled a rise that Coldwell was nearing. He got ahead of the banker, stopped and crouched in the brush beside the trail. He stepped out, gun in hand, as Coldwell came close.

"Put up your hands," he said.

Coldwell stopped. His hands shot up over his head, quickly, fear-propelled.

"What do you want?" he asked nervously.

Tex Kennedy smiled. He knew it wasn't a nice smile. He was thinking too much about Simms' being dead and old Bill Kennedy's being shot in the back for it to be a nice smile. He was wondering if maybe Coldwell didn't know a hell of a lot about Bill Kennedy's murder.

"Get off your horse," he said to the banker.

Coldwell got down.

"I got the note Ford Tabor sent to you," Tex told Coldwell. "I found it in Bill Kennedy's pocket. It had been scorched on the edges. You thought you burned it, but it didn't burn. What are you paying Ford Tabor a thousand dollars for, Coldwell? Who killed Bill Kennedy? What was the job Ford Tabor was supposed to have had half done by midnight tonight?"

Coldwell said nothing. He seemed paralyzed by fear. His hands, up above his head, began to tremble. Tex Kennedy smiled coldly at him again.

"I'm beginning to wonder some things, Coldwell," he said. "You're in cahoots with an outlaw. There's murder done. Tom Reed was accused of stealing money from your bank. I wonder if you're not behind it all. I wonder if maybe Tom Reed wasn't framed."

"You're crazy," said Bassett Coldwell nervously.

"Crazy enough to blow your belly out your backbone," said Tex Kennedy. "I'll give you thirty seconds to start talking. Then I'll pull the trigger."

BASSETT COLDWELL trembled visibly. A slight sound behind Tex made him start to turn. A cold, sarcastic voice behind him stiffened him.

"Put the gun down slow," somebody behind him said. "There's a gun six inches from the back of your head!"

Frustration coming to him, Tex lowered his gun. He laid it on the rock beside him. A stone rattled. A dark form stepped around in front of him. Ford Tabor, the outlaw who had talked with Coldwell up at the line camp grinned satirically at him. Four other men came behind him.

"This is Tex Kennedy, mebbe," Ford Tabor said. "I was supposed to kill you. We had you cornered at your ranch. We didn't think about you sneaking away in the smoke till it was too late. I'll do the job now!"

He raised his gun. Tex Kennedy forced a mocking smile to his lips, stared at Coldwell. He hoped what he was going to say was right. He hoped his bluff would work.

"You better ask Coldwell if he wants a lot of people to read the note you sent to him, Tabor," he said. "It's got his name on it and your name signed to it. It'll make interesting reading. Folks will ask a lot of questions!"

"Nobody'll read it," said Ford Tabor positively. "We'll see to that after you're dead."

"After I'm dead you won't see to anything," stated Tex. "I don't have it. It's where it'll be read when I don't show up. You better ask Coldwell if he can explain that note before you shoot, Tabor."

"Search him," said Coldwell nervously. "I know he had it, because he knew what was in it. He knew it had been partially burned, and I stuck it in the stove. I thought it was burned. See if he has it before you shoot him!"

One of the men behind Tabor came forward and went through Tex's pockets.

"There's no paper there," he said.

"Then don't kill him now!" said Coldwell, fear shaking his voice again. "Make him tell you where it is! I could never explain that note, Tabor. Another thousand if you get it!"

Ford Tabor smiled meanly, viciously. He stepped forward and hit Tex Kennedy across the head with the barrel of the gun. Tex stumbled backward and hit the big rock behind him. His head whirled dizzily and he was sick in the pit of his stomach.

"Where is it, Kennedy?" asked Tabor.

Tex Kennedy grinned. He shook his head to clear it.

"Try some more," he said.

Tabor stepped forward and hit him again, and the stars whirled in a mad gyration in front of Tex's eyes. Tabor put the gun away and started to smash his fists into Tex's face. Every blow that landed smashed his head back against the rock, and the world became a dim unreal thing before his eyes.

The forms there were vague, uncertain shapes. A voice seemed very far away. The blows in his face didn't hurt any more, and the rock behind his head seemed to be a separate

hammer thudding deadening blows on his brain, attacking him from the rear.

TEX started to sink down to the ground and Tabor stopped hitting him. The hammer stopped pounding at the back of his head.

"Where's the paper?" asked Tabor.

Tex thought it was funny how far away his voice sounded. He wondered why Ford Tabor wanted to whisper to him. He kept telling himself that he mustn't let it slip that the paper was burned. As long as they thought it existed he could live. As soon as they knew it was destroyed he would die. He shook his head definitely.

"Stake him out on his face," Tabor's voice came dimly. "We'll see what a rope across his back will do!"

Hands grasped him. He felt ropes lashed to his ankles and wrists. He felt his shirt being ripped from his back. Something whizzed through the air and something like a red-hot snake sent sharp agony through his back. The whizzing, whistling sound came again. The red-hot thing landed again. That ripping, tearing agony was back there all the time now. It stayed there. Every blow that landed left its searing fire there and then put a new burn somewhere else.

It seemed as if his entire back were afire. Every nerve in him made him want to open his mouth and scream, to tell Ford Tabor to stop, that the note had been burned. But that subconscious thing in his brain kept revolving there, telling him to keep his mouth shut. If he talked he'd die. If he didn't talk he'd live. And he had to live, to find out who killed Bill Kennedy, and what Coldwell's game was.

"Where is it?" Ford Tabor kept asking.

Tex Kennedy kept on shaking his head as the blows kept falling. But finally he couldn't shake it, and finally Tabor stopped. The whizzing sound

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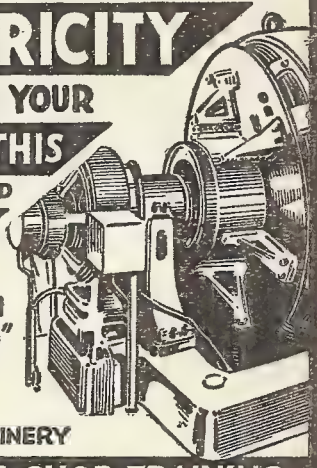

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wasn't there in the air any more, and the silence seemed to be peculiar. The fire still was there on Tex Kennedy's back, just as though the rope were still landing there. Under the dull, throbbing ache of it all he could still feel it.

"You might as well kill him," Ford Tabor's voice said. "He won't talk."

"But he has to talk," said Coldwell. "If that paper shows up I'll have to leave the country. Remember, a thousand if you get it!"

"All right," said Tabor, "I'll whip him some more!"

Tex Kennedy heard the rope being dragged across the sand as Tabor picked it up. He tried to steel himself against the blow he knew would come. But something inside him shrieked a protest. Sooner or later he'd talk, he knew. Out of his head with pain he'd babble the truth. Then they'd kill him. Then he'd die, staked out like a coyote hide to dry! But if he was up, his hands free—

"Wait a minute," he said huskily. "I'll talk."

Ford Tabor chuckled.

"Where is it?" asked Coldwell eagerly.

"Cut me loose and I'll take you there," said Tex. "I can't tell you. The fellow who has it wouldn't give it to you, and you couldn't get it. I'll get it for you."

THERE was a lot of silence, and it was very heavy. They were wondering if he was planning a trick. Then somebody cut the ropes, and he rose very shakily to his feet. One of the men led his horse to him and he climbed into the saddle.

"You lead the way," said Tabor. "There'll be guns on your back. So be careful. I can shoot you without killing you. Don't kid yourself that I won't do it!"

Tex Kennedy nodded. He wasn't kidding himself. He started away. He didn't know where he was going. But going anywhere was better than lying back there with the ropes about his wrists and ankles. Chancing a bullet in the back was better than the rope that kept on pounding, slashing, tearing at his back, driving the sanity from his brain.

"Was the killing of Bill Kennedy in on your deal, Coldwell?" he asked. "Was that part of the crooked scheme you're pulling?"

Ford Tabor chuckled.

"Bill Kennedy was an accident," he said. "He was riding too close to the line camp. My men were up there and I didn't want him to see them. I couldn't afford to have the law snooping around where we had to stay for a few days. So I stopped him."

"I wondered who killed him," said Tex Kennedy.

He marveled at the fact that he was glad to know that Tabor had done it. He marveled that he kept telling himself that he'd kill Tabor for that. That was why he was glad. He didn't have a gun. He was weak as hell. He had one foot in the grave, yet he kept thinking about killing Ford Tabor! He'd do it!

"You're talking an awful lot, Tabor," said Coldwell cautiously.

"What's the difference?" said Ford Tabor. "The law's after me anyway. And even if it wasn't, this jasper won't live to tell tales out of school!"

The click of the steel-shod hoofs on the rocks behind him was the only sound then in Tex's ears. The horse beneath him rocked and jarred his wounds as they moved slowly along. Suddenly he was conscious of something rubbing under his right leg, a bulge under the saddle skirt. Tex let his swimming eyes drop down and he stared at the butt of a carbine that was there, sticking out of the saddle boot under his leg.

He loosed one hand from the saddle horn and started to ease the rifle out of the scabbard. He pulled it up an inch at a time. He was careful not to let his arms move. He did it with his fingers. He held the gun steady,

kept it from falling by pressing his leg tight against it, holding it hard against the horse.

Then it was free, and he reached over and grasped his fingers about the pistol grip on the stock. Tex slowed his horse. The others behind him came closer. He cleared the rifle, swung it hard around and heard it hit, felt the jar of it as it smashed one of the riders in the face. He hoped it wasn't Tabor. He wanted Tabor alive. He wanted to kill him face to face, with a gun in his fist! He wanted to blast the life out of him for killing Bill.

There was a yell. Tex Kennedy raked his horse with his spurs and whirled it sharply and flailed out with the gun again. He smashed another man across the head with the long steel barrel, and a pistol exploded in his face. The blaze of it blinded him, and the fire of it burned his head.

But the bullet didn't hit him. More guns started to boom and thunder and roar as he raced away. Tex felt a bullet tear through him, and he nearly lost his rifle, but he clutched it grimly. He clutched the saddle horn tightly and raced on, the thunder of pursuit behind him, the bullets swarming about him.

He cut in among the rocks. He raked his horse cruelly. Turning and dodging, he cut down into a dry wash. When he stopped to lever the rifle he glimpsed the shine of the brass cartridge in the chamber. He closed the lever, and his lips tightened as he raised the gun. But the thunder of hoofs passed him, faded in the distance.

Tex rode out of the draw, the cocked rifle in his hands, his slitted eyes on the hills. Now let Tabor come! Now let the rannies who thought it was good sport to beat a fellow across the back with a rope show their faces! Now let him meet Coldwell and see who would do the talking!

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29x5.25-19		2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.35
5.50-17		3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18		3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19		3.35	1.45
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6.00-17		3.40	1.40
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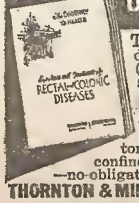

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CHAPTER IV

VERY slowly, carefully, dizzy and weak, Tex Kennedy rode on. He kept thinking of Tabor killing Bill Kennedy. He kept thinking of the thousand dollars Bassett Coldwell had paid to Ford Tabor. He wondered why he had paid it to him; wondered if maybe Coldwell hadn't framed that theft charge onto young Tom Reed, if that, too, wasn't a part of Bassett Coldwell's dirty work. He wondered vaguely what the hell he, Tex Kennedy, was fighting for.

No matter what he proved onto Bassett Coldwell, Tex Kennedy would be sunk. He would still be hated by Sally Reed and old Buck Reed. He could never market his cattle. They'd still lie about Zurk Edwards killing Simms, because they wanted to make trouble for Tex Kennedy. Even if he succeeded in pinning some sort of a crooked deal onto Bassett Coldwell, Tex Kennedy might as well pack up his belongings and get out of the country.

Buck Reed would see to it that he was railroaded for killing Zurk, one of Buck's men. He would see to it that Tex Kennedy starved to death on a ranch with plenty of cattle, but with no way to market them.

But something kept telling him to keep on. Maybe he could clear Tom Reed's name. Maybe he could get Ford Tabor for shooting Bill Kennedy in the back.

Tex swayed weakly in the saddle. His back was a deadened thing now, something that seemed apart from him. And his wounds ached, and the blood ran down his side from the latest wound, weakening him more. Tex grasped the rifle with one hand, clutching the saddle horn with the other. He had a hell of a time keeping his head up, to keep it from bobbing wearily down on his breast. He had a hell of a time keeping his eyes open.

He guessed he'd have a hell of a time to keep alive long enough to get Ford Tabor, or to clear Tom Reed. He wondered if Sally Reed would ever be sorry if he died, and he guessed she wouldn't. She'd always hate him, because of old Bill having to shoot Tom.

Out of the night a vague shape took form in Tex Kennedy's eyes. He stopped and cocked the rifle. As he half raised it, a grim smile touched his lips when he saw it was Bassett Coldwell.

"I was looking for you, Coldwell," Tex said.

Coldwell stopped. He gave a high, shrill cry of fear and whirled his horse. Tex Kennedy's rifle cracked and Coldwell's horse went down. The banker sprawled out onto the ground. Tex Kennedy rode slowly over to where he lay and Coldwell looked up at Kennedy and began to babble.

"Don't shoot me! I didn't whip you. I didn't do anything but tell them not to kill you. Remember, Kennedy? I saved your life!"

Tex Kennedy nodded. "I remember," he said coldly. "Sure. You saved my life! You offered them a thousand dollars not to kill me!"

He levered the carbine, pointed it at Coldwell.

"Now you can save your own life," he told the banker. If you tell me what I want to know you can live. If you don't you can die. Tell me what your deal is with Tabor. Tell me how you framed Tom Reed. Write me a confession that Zurk Edwards was a dirty crook, so I won't be hunted by the law for killing him. Start talking, Coldwell! Somehow I don't give much of a damn whether you live or die!"

BASSETT COLDWELL opened his mouth, but his voice was so husky he had to swallow before he could talk.

"All right," he said hurriedly. "I'll tell you. I framed Tom Reed. I was in the hole. I gambled with the depositors' money and lost. I was short and I had to saddle it onto somebody quick. So I fixed the books and made it look like Tom Reed did it. But even

that wasn't enough. I had to get you and Buck Reed out of the way so I could fix up your mortgages for more than they actually were.

"I had to have you both killed so I could do that. The papers were not recorded. I could do it if you were both dead. I hired Ford Tabor to do it, through Zurk Edwards. I knew Zurk Edwards in prison. I was there for forgery. He was there for bank robbery."

"Write that down and sign it," said Tex Kennedy. "Have you got a paper and pencil?"

Coldwell nodded. He fished in his pocket and got a pencil and paper and started to write. A low humming sound came into the air and Coldwell stopped writing and listened.

"Keep at it," ordered Tex. "Hurry up. If that's Ford Tabor coming you better have it done before he gets here!"

Coldwell started to write again, and Tex Kennedy's legs began to wabble. He wanted to sit down and rest. He was afraid he was going to fall down before the banker finished. He was afraid the hoofbeats he heard were from the horses of Tabor and his men. If it was, then Coldwell's confession would do him no good. And maybe it wouldn't do him any good anyway.

Even though the law wouldn't hunt him for killing Zurk Edwards, old Buck Reed would still hate the guts of anybody named Kennedy. Sally would still look at him with ice in her eyes, with her lips cold and straight instead of soft and curving.

The hoofbeats came closer and Tex Kennedy's legs became weaker. He knelt down behind a rock, leveled the rifle across it. He had five shells! There were four or five men! Dimly, he could see them. He smiled.

The five dim shapes came closer. They stopped suddenly. Somebody yelled: "There's his horse!"

A shot flamed out from the shadows, and the tall, lean frame of Ford

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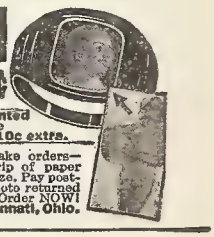

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Tabor was visible to Tex Kennedy for an instant. Kennedy's rifle leveled, steady, the sight centered on Ford Tabor. Tex pulled the trigger. The gun crashed and Tabor reached up to clutch at some invisible thing in the sky as he smashed backwards out of the saddle.

Tex Kennedy smiled grimly as he began to shoot very slowly, very carefully, at the dim shapes out there. He saved his shells. When he shot he prayed for a hit. Tex knew he'd die, because they were down now behind the rocks, and they could pick him off. He didn't have enough ammunition to last. He guessed that they'd whip him.

Coldwell would tear up his confession and everybody would keep on believing that Zurk Edwards was an honest cowpoke, and that Tex Kennedy had killed him out of pure killing cussedness. And Sally would keep on hating him, never knowing that at least he had tried to help both her and the old Buck Reed in clearing Tom Reed's name. He'd done that even when he knew it wouldn't help him any to do it.

The flame reached out from the darkness and seemed like vicious little snakes spitting at him as the guns crackled. The bullets screamed off the rocks, and seemed to sing a song of mockery and frustration in his ears. And the shots snarled and roared and boomed, like the combined thunder of all the cannons in the world.

Bassett Coldwell began to scream. He yelled at the men out there as he saw Tex Kennedy try twice to raise his rifle before he could get it up.

"Come and get him!" he screamed. "Charge him! He's nearly dead! You've got him whipped!"

He moved closer to Tex Kennedy and watched him like a fat, glass-eyed toad, crouched behind a rock, waiting for a chance to pounce when Kennedy fell. The paper in his hands fluttered as he hesitated, tried to make up his mind to tear it up.

BUT they didn't charge, and Tex Kennedy's carbine flamed again. A man screamed down there in the darkness, and Tex grinned. It was funny he'd hit that gent, because he couldn't see him. He couldn't see much of anything now. Even Bassett Coldwell was a dim, uncertain shape, a fat, goggle-eyed thing that crouched near him. Coldwell stared at him with eyes of glass, the moon reflection on the spectacles making the whole glass seem white.

Into the blaring noise of crashing guns came the pound of hoofs. Bassett Coldwell peered up over the rock behind which he crouched. He sank back down quickly again. His hands clutched the paper up in front of him and he started to tear it. Tex Kennedy lunged forward, and his fist shot out and crashed against Coldwell's fat jaw. Coldwell fell backward, his head hitting against a rock. Tex Kennedy took the paper from his hands and thrust it in his pocket.

He tried to stand up again and get his rifle to shoot at the dim shapes that speared towards him. But he fell down and the rifle fell from his hands. Tex was all in. He was done.

It seemed as if a million bullets screamed and moaned off the rocks. It seemed as if a million horses pounded forward and clattered and thundered near to where Tex lay. Somebody shot a gun and the bullets thudded into the sand beside Tex Kennedy's head. Somebody else shot another gun.

The man who had shot at Kennedy reached high up above his head as though he were trying to hold onto something to keep him from being smashed out of the saddle. It was one of Tabor's men, and Tex Kennedy wondered why the hell all those gents reached up there in the air to grab at something. There wasn't anything there.

Then it was very quiet all of a sudden. A lot of horsemen came back into the clearing, dismounted, and stood around looking at Tex Ken-

nedy. Tex looked up at them and his eyes stayed on one of them while amazement flooded into him. One of them was Tom Reed, the young gent that old Bill Kennedy had thought he had killed. And one of them was Sally Reed, and she was bending down to stroke the wet hair back out of Tex Kennedy's eyes.

"Tom came home, Tex," she said. "And he told us that your father didn't even try to hit him. He tried to scare him by shooting. But Tom was afraid to stop. He had discovered the shortage in his accounts and went to your father about it. He gave your father a note he had seen Bassett Coldwell put into the stove to burn.

"He was afraid that the bank examiner and Coldwell would put him in prison, even though he had mentioned it to your father. The note didn't prove that Tom hadn't stolen anything. It didn't even have Coldwell's name on it. So when he jumped his horse into the river he hid when your father got his horse."

She stopped and looked more closely at Tex, and a faint, wan smile touched her lips.

"I'm sorry, Tex," she said softly. "I'm sorry about everything. Maybe you think it's only because Tom came back and I learned that your father hadn't killed him. But I was sorry before he came. I knew that your father had done only what he had to do."

"I hope you'll forgive a hot-headed old fool," spoke up old Buck Reed. "I know that Bill Kennedy was all man. I knew it even when I said I hated him. I know that even if he had shot Tom, that he'd have done it only because he had to. Our agreement to market cattle through my land is still good. It always will be good."

"I came back to take a chance with the law," said Tom Reed. "I got to thinking. If I couldn't trust my friends, and trust the law that makes this country decent, then I guessed I wasn't very much of a citizen. If

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Tex Kennedy fished into his pocket and pulled out the confession Coldwell had written. The diamond ring Sally had given him fell out with it, and he watched her pick it up. She held it in her hand and looked at it.

"You won't have to go to jail," Tex told Tom Reed. "Coldwell has confessed that he framed you. He's also confessed that Zurk Edwards was a crook, and that he'd been to prison for bank robbery. Read what he wrote and you'll sabe it all. I guess that sort of clears things up for everybody."

Tex looked at Sally again. As she looked down at the ring in her hand, then up at him again, she slipped the ring on her finger, and he knew that everything had been cleared up. Everything.

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